Karen Joy Fowler FACE VALUE

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

NOVEMBER

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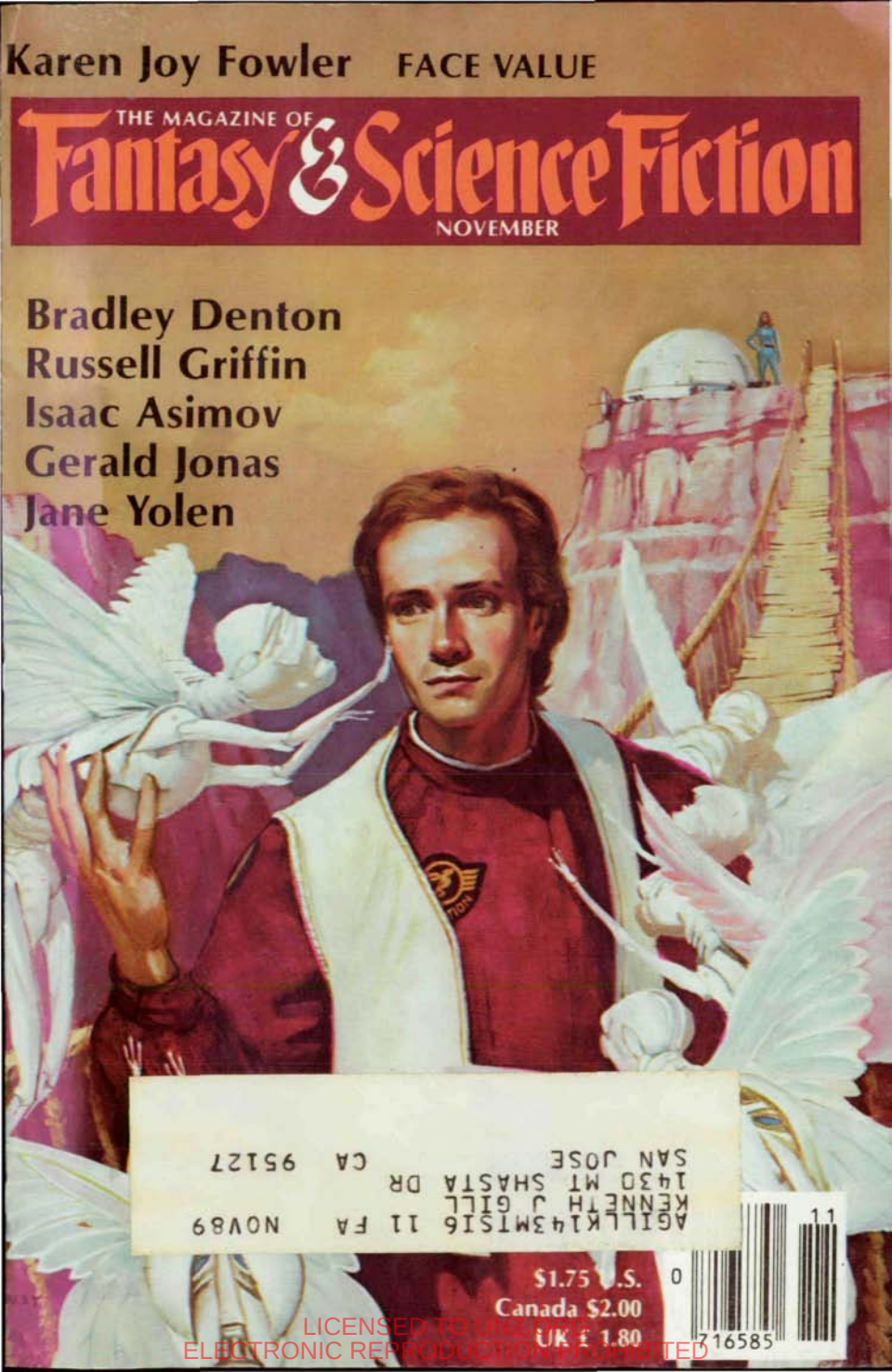

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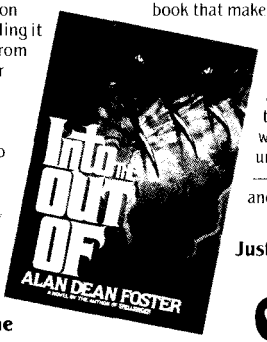

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Karen Fowler ("Wild Boys" March 1986) is one of SF's fine new writers; a collection of her short fiction, ARTIFICIAL THINGS, will be published shortly by Bantam/Spectra. This new story — about a husband/wife team and their study of an alien race that has lost the ability to fly — is science fiction at its very best, in which we read about something truly alien and discover something about humans . . .

Face Value

BY

KAREN JOY FOWLER

It was almost like being alone. Taki, who had been alone one way or another most of his life, recognized this and thought he could deal with it. What choice did he have? It was only that he had allowed himself to hope for something different. A second star, small and dim, joined the sun in the sky, making its appearance over the rope bridge that spanned the empty river. Taki crossed the bridge in a hurry to get inside before the hottest part of the day began.

Something flashed briefly in the dust at his feet, and he stooped to pick it up. It was one of Hesper's poems, half finished, left out all night. Taki had stopped reading Hesper's poetry. It reflected nothing, not a whisper of her life here with him, but was filled with longing for things and people behind her. Taki pocketed the poem on his way to the house, stood outside the door, and removed what dust he could with the stiff brush that hung at the entrance. He keyed his admittance; the door made a slight sucking sound as it resealed behind him.

Hesper had set out an iced glass of ade for him. Taki drank it at a gulp, superimposing his own dusty fingerprints over hers sketched lightly in the condensation on the glass. The drink was heavily sugared and only made him thirstier.

A cloth curtain separated one room from another, a blue sheet, Hesper's innovation since the dwelling was designed as a single, multifunctional space. Through the curtain, Taki heard a voice and knew Hesper was listening again to her mother's letter — Earth weather, the romances of her younger cousins. The letter had arrived weeks ago, but Taki was careful

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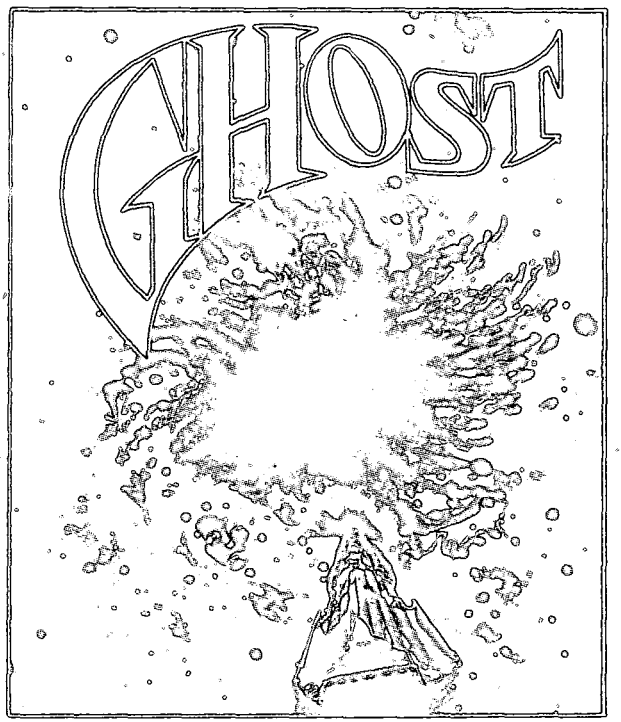

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not to remind Hesper how old its news really was. If she chose to imagine the lives of her family moving along the same timeline as her own, then this must be a fantasy she needed. She knew the truth. In the time it had taken her to travel here with Taki, her mother had grown old and died. Her cousins had settled into marriages happy or unhappy or had faced life alone. The letters that continued to arrive with some regularity were an illusion. A lifetime later, Hesper would answer them.

Taki ducked through the curtain to join her. "Hot," he told her as if this were news. She lay on their mat stomach down, legs bent at the knees, feet crossed in the air. Her hair, the color of dried grasses, hung over her face. Taki stared for a moment at the back of her head. "Here," he said. He pulled out her poem from his pocket and laid it by her hand. "I found this out front."

Hesper switched off the letter and rolled onto her back away from the poem. She was careful not to look at Taki. Her cheeks were stained with irregular red patches, so that Taki knew she had been crying again. The observation caused him a familiar mixture of sympathy and impatience. His feelings for Hesper always came in these uncomfortable combinations; it tired him.

"'Out front,'" Hesper repeated, and her voice held a practiced tone of uninterested nastiness. "And how did you determine that one part of this featureless landscape was the 'front'?"

"Because of the door. We have only the one door, so it's the front door."

"No," said Hesper. "If we had two doors, then one might arguably be the front door and the other the back door, but with ony one it's just the door." Her gaze went straight upward. "You use words so carelessly. Words from another world. They mean nothing here." Her eyelids fluttered briefly, the lashes darkened with tears. "It's not just an annoyance to me, you know," she said. "It can't help but damage your work."

"My work is the study of the mene," Taki answered. "Not the creation of a new language." And Hesper's eyes closed.

"I really don't see the difference," she told him. She lay a moment longer without moving, then opened her eyes and looked at Taki directly. "I don't want to have this conversation. I don't know why I started it. Let's rewind, run it again. I'll be the wife this time. You come in and say, 'Honey, I'm home!' and I'll ask you how your morning was."

Taki began to suggest that this was a scene from another world and would mean nothing here. He had not yet framed the sentence, when he heard the door seal release and saw Hesper's face go hard and white. She reached for her poem and slid it

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under the scarf at her waist. Before she could get to her feet, the first of the mene had joined them in the bedroom.

Taki ducked through the curtain to fasten the door before the temperature inside the house rose. The outer room was filled with dust, and the hands that reached out to him as he went past left dusty streaks on his clothes and his skin. He counted eight of the mene, fluttering about him like large moths, moths the size of human children, but with furry vestigial wings, hourglass abdomens, sticklike limbs. They danced about him in the open spaces, looked through the cupboards, and pulled the tapes from his desk. When they had their backs to him, he could see the symmetrical arrangement of dark spots that marked their wings in a pattern resembling a human face. A very sad face, very distinct. Masculine, Taki had always thought, but Hesper disagreed.

The party that had made initial contact under the leadership of Hans Mene so many years ago had wisely found the faces too whimsical for mention in their report. Instead they had included pictures and allowed them to speak for themselves. Perhaps the original explorers had been asking the same question Hesper posed the first time Taki showed her the pictures. Was the face really there? Or was this only evidence of the ability of humans to see their own faces in everything? Hesper had a poem titled "The Kitchen God," which recounted the true story of a woman about a century ago who had found the image of Christ in the burn marks on a tortilla. "Do *they* see it, too?" she had asked Taki, but there was as yet no way to ask this of the mene, no way to know if they had reacted with shock and recognition to the faces of the first humans they had seen, though studies of the mene eye suggested a finer depth perception, which might significantly distort the flat image.

Taki thought that Hesper's own face had changed since the day, only six months ago calculated as Traveltime, when she had said she would come here with him and he thought it was because she loved him. They had sorted through all the information that had been collected to date on the mene, and her face had been all sympathy then. "What would it be like," she asked him, "to be able to fly and then to lose this ability? To outgrow it? What would a loss like that do to the racial consciousness of a species?"

"It happened so long ago, I doubt it's even noticed as a loss," Taki had answered. "Legends, myths not really believed, perhaps. Probably not even that. In the racial memory not even a whisper."

Hesper had ignored him. "What a shame they don't write poetry," she had said. She was finding them less romantic now as she joined Taki in the outer room, her face stoic. The

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mene surrounded her, ran their string-fingered hands all over her body, inside her clothing. One mene attempted to insert a finger into her mouth, but Hesper tightened her lips together resolutely, dust on her chin. Her eyes were fastened on Taki. Accusingly? Beseechingly? Taki was no good at reading people's eyes. He looked away.

Eventually the mene grew bored. They left in groups, a few lingering behind to poke among the boxes in the bedroom, then following the others until Hesper and Taki were left alone. Hesper went to wash herself as thoroughly as their limited water supply allowed; Taki swept up the loose dust. Before he finished, Hesper returned, showing him her empty jewelry box without a word. The jewelry had all belonged to her mother.

"I'll get them when it cools," Taki told her.

"Thank you."

It was always Hesper's things that the mene took. The more they disgusted her — pawing over her, rummaging through her things, no way to key the door against clever mene fingers even if Taki had agreed to lock them out, which he had not — the more fascinating they seemed to find her. They touched her twice as often as they touched Taki, and much more insistently. They took her jewelry, her poems, her letters, all the things she treasured most; and Taki believed, although it was far too early in his studies really to speculate with any assurance, that the mene read something off the objects. The initial explorers had concluded that mene communication was entirely telepathic, and if this were accurate, then Taki's speculation was not such a leap. Certainly the mene didn't value the objects for themselves. Taki always found them discarded in the dust on this side of the rope bridge.

The fact that everything would be easily recovered did nothing to soften Hesper's sense of invasion. She mixed herself a drink, stirring it with the metal straw that poked through the dustproof lid. "You shouldn't allow it," she said at last, and Taki knew from the time that had elapsed that she had tried not to begin this familiar conversation. He appreciated her effort as much as he was annoyed by her failure.

"It's part of my job," he reminded her. "We have to be accessible to them. I study them. They study us. There's no way to differentiate the two activities, and certainly no way to establish communication except simultaneously."

"You're letting them study us, but you're giving them a false picture. You're allowing them to believe that humans intrude on each other in this way. Does it occur to you that they may be involved in similar charades? If so, what can either of us learn?"

Taki took a deep breath. "The need for privacy may not be as intrin-

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sically human as you imagine. I could point to many societies, prior to the plagues, that afforded very little of this. As for any deliberate misrepresentations on their part — well, isn't that the whole rationale for not sending a study team? Wouldn't I be further along if I were working with environmentalists, physiologists, linguists? But the risk of contamination increases exponentially with each additional human. We would be too much of a presence. Of course, I will be very careful. I am far from the stage in my study where I can begin to draw conclusions. When I visit them. . . ."

"Reinforcing the notion that such visits are ordinary human behavior. . . ." Hesper was looking at Taki with great coolness.

"When I visit them I am much more circumspect," Taki finished. "I conduct my study as unobtrusively as possible."

"And what do you imagine you are studying?" Hesper asked. She closed her lips tightly over the straw and drank. Taki regarded her steadily and with exasperation.

"Is this a trick question?" he asked. "I imagine I am studying the mene. What do you imagine I am studying?"

"What humans always study," said Hesper. "Humans."

You never saw one of the mene alone. Not ever. One never wandered off to watch the sun set or took its food to a solitary hole to eat without sharing. They did everything in groups, and although Taki had been observing them for weeks now and was able to identify individuals and had compiled charts of the groupings he had seen, trying to isolate families or friendships or work-castes, still the results were inconclusive.

His attempts at communication were similarly discouraging: He had tried verbalizations, but had not expected a response to them; he had no idea how they processed audio information, although they could hear. He had tried clapping and gestures, simple hand signals for the names of common objects. He had no sense that these efforts were noticed. They were so unfocused when he dealt with them, fluttering here, fluttering there. Taki's esp-quotient had never been measurable, yet he tried that route, too. He tried to send a simple command. He would trap a mene hand and hold it against his own cheek, trying to form in his mind the picture that corresponded to the action. When he released the hand, sticky mene fingers might linger for a moment or they might slip away immediately, tangle in his hair instead, or tap his teeth. Mene teeth were tiny and pointed like wires. Taki saw them only when the mene ate. At other times they were hidden inside the folds of skin that almost hid their eyes as well. Taki speculated that the skin

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flaps protected their mouths and eyes from the dust. Taki found mene faces less expressive than their backs. Head-on they appeared petaled and blind as flowers. When he wanted to differentiate one mene from another, Taki looked at their wings.

Hesper had warned him there would be no art, and he had asked her how she could be so sure. "Because their communication system is perfect," she said. "Out of one brain and into the next with no loss of meaning, no need for abstraction. Art arises from the inability to communicate. Art is the imperfect symbol. Isn't it?" But Taki, watching the mene carry water up from their underground deposits, asked himself where the line between tools and art objects should be drawn. For no functional reason that he could see, the water containers curved in the centers like the shapes of the mene's own abdomens.

Taki followed the mene belowground, down some shallow, roughcut stairs into the darkness. The mene themselves were slightly luminescent when there was no other light; at times and seasons some were spectacularly so, and Taki's best guess was that this was sexual. Even with the dimmer members, Taki could see well enough. He moved through a long tunnel with a low ceiling that made him stoop. He could hear water at the other end of it, not the water itself, but a special quality to the silence that told him water was near. The lake was clearly artificial, collected during the rainy season, which no human had seen yet. The tunnel narrowed sharply. Taki could have gone forward, but felt suddenly claustrophobic and backed out instead. What did the mene think, he wondered, of the fact that he came here without Hesper?

Did they notice this at all? Did it teach them anything about humans that they were capable of understanding?

"Their lives together are perfect," Hesper said. "Except for those useless wings. If they are ever able to talk with us at all, it will be because of those wings."

Of course Hesper was a poet. The world was all language as far as she was concerned.

When Taki first met Hesper, at a party given by a colleague of his, he had asked her what she did. "I name things," she had said. "I try to find the right names for things." In retrospect, Taki thought it was bullshit. He couldn't remember why he had been so impressed with it at the time, a deliberate miscommunication when a simple answer, "I write poetry," would have been so clear and easy to understand. He felt the same way about her poetry itself, needlessly obscure, slightly evocative, but it left the reader feeling that he had fallen short somehow, that it had been a test and he had flunked it. It was unkind po-

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etry, and Taki had worked so hard to read it then.

"Am I right?" he would ask her anxiously when he finished. "Is that what you're saying?" But she would answer that the poem spoke for itself.

"Once it's on the page, I've lost control over it. Then the reader determines what it says or how it works." Hesper's eyes were gray, the irises so large and intense within their dark rings that they made Taki dizzy. "So you're always right. By definition. Even if it's not remotely close to what I intended."

What Taki really wanted was to find himself in Hesper's poems. He would read them anxiously for some symbol that could be construed as him, some clue as to his impact on her life. But he was never there.

It was against policy to send anyone into the field alone. There were pros and cons, of course, but ultimately the isolation of a single professional was seen as too cruel. For shorter projects there were advantages in sending a threesome, but during a longer study the group dynamics in a trio often became difficult. Two was considered ideal, and Taki knew that Rawji and Heyen had applied for this post, a husband-and-wife team in which both members were trained for this type of study. He had never stopped being surprised that the post had been offered to him instead. He could not even have been considered if Hesper had not convinced the committee of her willingness to accompany him, but she must have done much more. She must have impressed someone very much for them to decide that one trained xenologist and one poet might be more valuable than two trained xenologists. The committee had made some noises about possible "contamination" occuring between the two trained professionals, but Taki found this argument specious. "What did you say to them?" he asked her after her interview, and she shrugged.

"You know," she said. "Words."

Taki had hidden things from the committee during his own interview. Things about Hesper. Her moods, her deep attachment to her mother, her unreliable attachment to him. He must have known it would never work out, but he walked about in those days with the stunned expression of a man who had been given everything. Could he be blamed for accepting it? Could he be blamed for believing in Hesper's unexpected willingness to accompany him? It made a sort of equation for Taki. *If* Hesper were willing to give up everything and come with Taki, *then* Hesper loved Taki. An ordinary marriage commitment was reviewable every five years; this was something much greater. No other explanation made any sense.

The equation still held a sort of inevitability for Taki. *Then* Hesper loved Taki, *if* Hesper were willing to

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come with him. So somehow, sometime, Taki had done something that lost him Hesper's love. If he could figure out what, perhaps he could make her love him again. "Do you love me?" he had asked Hesper, only once; he had too much pride for these thinly disguised pleadings. "Love is such a difficult word," she had answered, but her voice had been filled with a rare softness and had not hurt Taki as much as it might.

The daystar was appearing again when Taki returned home. Hesper had made a meal, which suggsted she was coping well today. It included a sort of pudding made of a local fruit they had found themselves able to tolerate. Hesper called the pudding "boxty." It was apparently a private joke. Taki was grateful for the food and the joke, even if he didn't understand it. He tried to keep the conversation lighthearted, talking to Hesper about the mene water jars. Taki's position was that when the form of a practical object was less utilitarian than it might be, then it was art. Hesper laughed. She ran through a list of human artifacts and made him classify them.

"A paper clip," she said.

"The shape hasn't changed in centuries," he told her. "Not art."

"A safety pin."

Taki hesitated. How essential was the coil at the bottom of the pin? Very. "Not art," he decided.

"A hairbrush."

"Boar bristle?"

"Wood handle."

"Art. Definitely."

She smiled at him. "You're confusing ornamentation with art. But why not? It's as good a definition as any," she told him. "Eat your boxty."

They spent the whole afternoon alone, uninterrupted. Taki transcribed the morning's notes into his files and reviewed his tapes. Hesper recorded a letter whose recipient would never hear it and sang softly to herself.

That night he reached for her, his hand along the curve at her waist. She stiffened slightly, but responded by putting her hand on his face. He kissed her, and her mouth did not move. His movements became less gentle. It might have been passion; it might have been anger. She told him to stop, but he didn't. Couldn't. Wouldn't. "Stop," she said again, and he heard she was crying. "They're here. Please stop. They're watching us."

"Studying us," Taki said. "Let them." But he rolled away and released her. They were alone in the room. He would have seen the mene easily in the dark. "Hesper," he said. "There's no one here."

She lay rigid on her side of their bed. He saw the stitching of her backbone disappearing into her neck, and had a sudden feeling that he could see everything about her, how she was made, how she was held together. It made him no less angry.

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"I'm sorry," Hesper told him, but he didn't believe her. Even so, he was asleep before she was. He made his own breakfast the next morning without leaving anything out for her. He was gone before she had gotten out of bed.

The mene were gathering food, dried husks thick enough to protect the liquid fruit during the two-star dry season. They punctured the husks with their needle-thin teeth. Several crowded about him, greeting him with their fingers, checking his pockets, removing his recorder and passing it about until one of them dropped it in the dust. When they returned to work, Taki retrieved it, wiped it as clean as he could. He sat down to watch them, logged everything he observed. He noted in particular how often they touched each other, and wondered what each touch meant. Affection? Communication? Some sort of chain of command?

Later he went underground again, choosing another tunnel, looking for one that wouldn't narrow so as to exclude him, but finding himself beside the same lake with the same narrow access ahead. He went deeper this time until it gradually became too close for his shoulders. Before him he could see a luminescence; he smelled the dusty odor of the mene and could just make out a sound, too, a sort of movement, a grass-rubbing-together sound. He stooped and strained his eyes to see something in the faint light. It was like looking into the small end of a pair of binoculars. The tunnel narrowed and narrowed. Beyond it must be the mene homes, and he could never get into them. He contrasted this with the easy access they had to his home. At the end of his vision, he thought he could just see something move, but he wasn't sure. A light touch on the back of his neck and another behind his knee startled him. He twisted around to see a group of the mene crowded into the tunnel behind him. It gave him the feeling of being trapped, and he had to force himself to be very gentle as he pushed his way back and let the mene go through. The dark pattern of their wings stood in high relief against the luminescent bodies. The human faces grew smaller and smaller until they disappeared.

Leave me alone," Hesper told him. It took Taki completely by surprise. He had done nothing but enter the bedroom; he had not even spoken yet. "Just leave me alone."

Taki saw no signs that Hesper had ever gotten up. She lay against the pillow, and her cheek was still creased from the wrinkles in the sheets. She had not been crying. There was something worse in her face, something that alarmed Taki.

"Hesper?" he asked. "Hesper? Did you eat anything? Let me get you something to eat."

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It took Hesper a moment to answer. When she did, she looked ordinary again. "Thank you," she said. "I am hungry." She joined him in the outer room, wrapped in their blanket, her hair tangled around her face. She got a drink for herself, dropping the empty glass once, stooping to retrieve it. Taki had the strange impression that the glass fell slowly. When they has first arrived, the gravitational pull had been light, just perceptibly lighter then Earth's. Without quite noticing, this had registered on him in a sort of lightheartedness. But Hesper had complained of feelings of dislocation, disconnection. Taki put together a cold breakfast that Hesper ate slowly, watching her own hands as if they fascinated her. Taki looked away. "Fork," she said. He looked back. She was smiling at him.

"What?"

"Fork."

He understood. "Not art."

"Four tines?"

He didn't answer.

"Roses carved on the handle."

"Well then, art. Because of the handle. Not because of the tines." He was greatly reassured.

The mene came while he was telling her about the tunnel. They put their dusty fingers in her food, pulled it apart. Hesper set her fork down and pushed the plate away. When they reached for her, she pushed them away, too. They came back. Hesper shoved harder.

"Hesper," said Taki.

"I just want to be left alone. They never leave me alone." Hesper stood up, towering above the mene. The blanket fell to the floor. "We flew here," Hesper said to the mene. "Did you see the ship? Didn't you see the pod? Doesn't that interest you? Flying?" She laughed and flapped her arms until they froze, horizontal at her sides. The mene reached for her again, and she brought her arms in to protect her breasts, pushing the mene away repeatedly, harder and harder, until they tired of approaching her and went into the bedroom, reappearing with her poems in their hands. The door sealed behind them.

"I'll get them back for you," Taki promised, but Hesper told him not to bother.

"I haven't written in weeks," she said. "In case you hadn't noticed. I haven't finished a poem since I came here. I've lost that. Along with everything else." She brushed at her hair rather frantically with one hand. "It doesn't matter," she added. "My poems? Not art."

"Are you the best person to judge that?" Taki asked.

"Don't patronize me." Hesper returned to the table, looked again at the plate that held her unfinished breakfast, dusty from handling. "My critical faculties are still intact. It's just the poetry that's gone." She took the dish to clean it, scraped the food away. "I was never any good," she

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said. "Why do you think I came here? I had no poetry of my own, so I thought I'd write the mene's. I came to a world without words. I hoped it would be clarifying. I knew there was a risk." Her hands moved very fast. "I want you to know I don't blame you."

"Come and sit down a moment, Hesper," Taki said, but she shook her head. She looked down at her body and moved her hands over it.

"They feel sorry for us. Did you know that? They feel sorry about our bodies."

"How do *you* know that?" Taki asked.

"Logic. We have these completely functional bodies. No useless wings. Not art." Hesper picked up the blanket and headed for the bedroom. At the cloth curtain she paused a moment. "They love our loneliness, though. They've taken all mine. They never leave me alone now." She thrust her right arm suddenly out into the air. It made the curtain ripple. "Go away," she said, ducking behind the sheet.

Taki followed her. He was very frightened. "No one is here but us, Hesper," he told her. He tried to put his arms around her, but she pushed him back and began to dress.

"Don't touch me all the time," she said. He sank onto the bed and watched her. She sat on the floor to fasten her boots.

"Are you going out, Hesper?" he asked, and she laughed.

"Hesper is out," she said. "Hesper is out of place, out of time, out of luck, and out of her mind. Hesper has vanished completely. Hesper was broken into and taken."

Taki fastened his hands tightly together. "Please don't do this to me, Hesper," he pleaded. "It's really so unfair. When did I ask so much of you? I took what you offered me; I never took anything else. Please don't do this."

Hesper had found the brush and was pulling it roughly through her hair. He rose and went to her, grabbing her by the arms, trying to turn her to face him. "Please, Hesper!"

She shook loose from him without really appearing to notice his hands, and continued to work through the worst of her tangles. When she did turn around, her face was familiar, but somehow not Hesper's face. It was a face that startled him.

"Hesper is gone," it said. "We have her. You've lost her. We are ready to talk to you. Even though you will never, never, never understand." She reached out to touch him, laying her open palm against his cheek and leaving it there.

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It, Stephen King, Viking, $22.95

Galaxy Magazine, The Dark and the Light Years, David L. Rosheim, Advent: Publishers, $15.00

The Science Fiction Hall of Fame, Volume IV, Terry Carr, Ed., Avon, $4.95

A book's being bad doesn't mean its author is "bad," nor does even outright failure allow us safely to ignore a book. The new Stephen King is a significant piece of work; probably a landmark, certainly an object lesson, had we but the wit to find it and describe it.

In "The Body," a short novel contained in his collection, *Different Seasons*, King ends with the image of hail falling into a dead boy's upturned eyes. In *It*, 1140 text pages long, he begins with rain falling into a dead boy's eyes, and who could be blamed for taking this as a signal that he is returning to the mode of "The Body" in order to do an even better job.

Sadly — I am saddened because "The Body" is one of the best pieces of new American fiction I've read in this century, but it could be improved upon — he fails. Ordinarily, I would qualify such a verdict; it's possible he set out to do something else entirely, and therefore my judgment would be off the point. But in the case of this novel, I think it's safe to say he's failed no matter what he set out to do. He hasn't, in fact, even finished this book . . . or, at least, the pub-

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lished text fails to contain scenes which I'm sure occurred in King's mind, are certainly required by any standard of drama, but which, if ever written down, have not survived what we may wincingly call Viking's editorial work. So even if all he wanted to do toward the end of this five-year writing project was to get out the other side, he came close but not quite.

But let's look at what's been failed at; I believe it was magnificent, at times, in its author's mind. I believe he thought he was writing the quintessential horror novel. If he didn't, he should have. It is not quite anything, but it came close.

There are lots of things King writes well. What he writes excellently is the prepubescent scene — that special world in which children almost consciously work their way through the rituals of parting from what used to be called "the age of innocence."

King has realized or preserved something that most adults have not. He is fully aware that adults think of such people as incompetent adults; impaired organisms given to feeble thinking and inept physical performance. ("*Don't* go near the edge, you'll fall *in*! Don't they teach you about *gravity* in that school of yours?") In actual fact, of course, a child of eleven probably knows more about some aspects of gravity than Newton did as an adult, and only under very special circumstances does any sane organism not know its limits and respect them. Ergo, a child so addressed is aware that the utterance is insane — indicative of failed powers of observation; if it loves the affected parent, which it probably does, it is severely embarrassed.

There are other sorts of transaction with one's loved-ones in childhood, and somewhere in there is the reason for the night-terrors which are a common childhood experience. From those terrors, evoked and transformed by a creative artist, springs the nature — the complex nature — of horror fiction. So it is possible to link the writing of horror fiction to some particular sort of thing in childhood. By extension, it should also be possible to link popular vogues in horror fiction to some common factor in many childhoods of, say, thirty years ago, give or take about five years.

The thing of it is, while some children dream of flying, and others of sugarplums, none as far as I know have ever been consciously convinced that smiling aviators are waiting under the bed to take them on delightful journeys. And what we make of sugarplums in those endless hours before exhaustion lids our eyes is not Santa Claus but the story of Hansel and Gretel. All over the world at this very moment, as twilight sweeps around to darkness, children lie petrified, gripped by a terror they will never articulate to an adult, so pro-

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foundly taken by this thing and the compulsions it evokes that none of us will recall its agonies until — I fear — the last nightfall of our lives. You doubt this? You think your little Tommy or Sally goes angelic into slumber? I think you should be more alert not only to where your children's bodies are, but to where their imaginations have been abducted.*

Well, perhaps I overdramatize. Perhaps not every child goes through this. Uh-hunh. Since almost all adults barely remember it, perhaps some of them begin going amnesiac about it while still children, so that every morning is a spell of numbness and every night a time of onsetting uneasiness. Would they go for various chemical and behavioral defenses as soon as these became attainable? Would someone care to interview a good sample of "night people" and see what they recall of their childhood Circadian rhythms? What do you suppose they're numbing themselves against as they deal with their various sorts of fix?

Am I going too far afield here, with what's supposed to be a mere book review? Well, even on general principals I don't think so, but in the case of this book in particular, it's pretty clear this is at least the rudiment of the territory we're supposed to be exploring. King makes a lot of careless mistakes when he writes, but they are invariably failures to cross-check his research.* When he's in the earlier, creative, stages, he also makes mistakes, of course — errors of judgment, mostly — but they are the honest, hard-won kind, and there is nothing careless about them. Going on that basis, this is the novel in which King deliberately set out to link childhood and horror, to distinguish between what is horrible to children and what to adults, to differentiate between adult and pre-adolescent responses to forms of horror, and, very likely, to indict the adult world for horrifying its children while having suppressed how it was in its day horrified.

This book is full of scenes in which adults fluff off the continual horrifying deaths of children in a small Maine town; they ignore details such as torn-off limbs and talon slashes, reaching for grotesque "common sense" explanations of each individual tragedy. They do not keep accurate count at all of how many children from the former lumbermill town

And now some fatuous dolt will cite this as an admission that reading fantasy gives children bad dreams. It's the other way around, fatuous dolt . . . waking night terrors give rise to fantasy literatures in an attempt to turn them into dreams. Where do the terrors come from? Read on.

I suspect he does his "research" entirely from memory, which is a risky thing to depend on for a kid with embedded night terrors.

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of Derry have actually disappeared over the decades. Periodically they impose a "curfew" and post warning signs about psychopathic strangers, but they blindly refuse to consider any purely domestic explanation. Nor do they see any significance in the periodic "accidents" which wipe out scores of children at a time. They also turn their backs on cruelties visited on young ones by adolescent bullies who are surely cast in roles which prove that clods are evil because they can be the numb tools of plangent forces and excruciating urges. And they perform their own wet-lipped cruelties on every member of their own society who in any way displays weakness or vulnerability.

None of that can possibly be in this book by accident. If it was not deliberately planned, it is what King was clearly groping for. The symbolic structures are too plainly stated for at least his subconscious not to have tripped over them repeatedly. And surely if there is a writer alive who could tell the story of how childhood is for many children, King is the person most likely to have thought of it and tried to tell it literally.

Literally. Such works as *Titus Groan* or *The Lord of The Flies* are allegories, however hard they rake the ribs of the psyche. *It*, while objectifying horror (to some extent) via the thing in the sewers, would nevertheless work just about exactly the same if there were in fact no creature from the paraverse beyond the "real" world made by the dying Turtle. The novel is entirely do-able as a series of scenes in which the seven leading characters undergo a *folie-á-sept*. In this "benign" group delusion, accidentally self-inflicted injuries are ascribed to supernatural forces, and the many additional "normal" abuses dealt out to children by the adult world are simply assimilated into a growing canon of revulsive attraction to that thing which is most often seen as Pennywise the Clown.

Let me give you a quick precis, here. Seven of these children, one a girl, are particularly sought by the Pennywise creature which emerges periodically from the sewers under Derry. Each of these children is in some sense a victim of parental abuse, and each bears the signs; asthma, literal bruises, a stutter, obesity, etc. Driven together into a "losers' club" by schoolyard bullies and parental idiosyncrasies, they seem utterly pathetic. But although the shape-changing It creature takes many others, it cannot quite get at them; the catalogue of their hair-breadth escapes grows increasingly longer. Despite its ability to spring up, werewolf-like, out of toilet bowls, and its power to pour blood up out of drains, to distract adults and to liberate homicidal murderers to do its bidding, It somehow cannot quite get a grip on these children, who, in an epic confronta-

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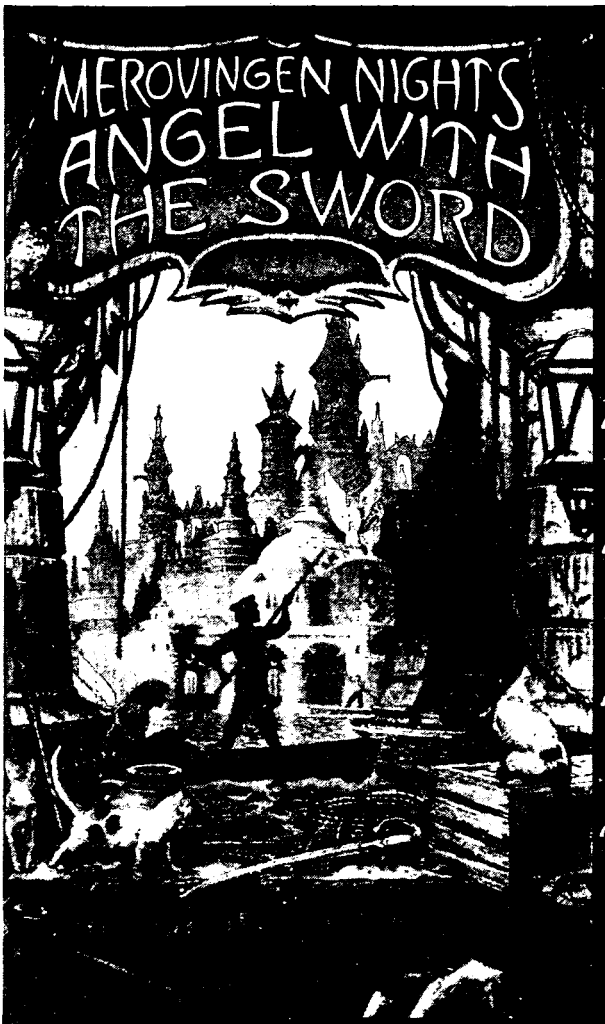

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tion far down in lost parts of the labyrinthine sewers, nearly kill it with a silver slingshot-pellet. Retreating, it nurses itself and broods, while the children grow into adults. Then it comes out again, and this time they must kill it despite the fact that they are no longer seven and no longer innocent.

There is too much here — far too much, deployed in a peculiar hop-skipping technique — for this to be a routine King horror novel or even a good one. This one has *magnum opus* written all over it, and, carefully read, will disquiet you as no mere werewolf or extraterrestrial spider-thing possibly could. I don't think it will be possible for any other horror writer to pursue a serious career without first reading this book, or for any critic to comprehend the field without a close appraisal of what's going on here.

But what is wrong here is that King has made it possible for people to read it as a horror novel, rather than as a novel about horror. He has obviously worked very hard on it, even though he was almost certainly doing quite a few other things over the five years this book was in preparation. But he has worked at cross-purposes, I think, and I further think that toward the end he knew it. Toward the end, scenes are almost thrown away, and the horror images become starkly conventional. There is also a spate of the sort of pseudo-profundity that masks emptiness:

"He raced down the hill . . . he raced to beat the devil" on P. 1141 is a total nonsequitur in a book which has studiously avoided Judeo-Christian imagery up to that point. Contrast it to "It's no part of a natural order we understand or condone," on P. 517; that "condone" goes off like a rather well-placed shaped charge of thought. Although it is not optimally placed, it is nevertheless clearly the sound of someone who has not yet yielded to despair at ever getting this thing right.

It *should* have been done as a "straight" novel, I suspect. Sitting here and subtracting the overtly supernatural from it in my mind, I get a far more dynamic book . . . a combination of Hubbard's "Fear," which pays off when you realize it *isn't* fantasy, and "The Body," which lacked only an explication of why a band of innocents would make an epic journey just to gaze upon a dead innocent, and feel compelled to take along a pistol.

King is taking his lumps for this —*Publishers' Weekly* has panned it, other influential sources are doing the same, and everyone is running for cover, I suppose. I think King did get in over his head, not perhaps as a writer so much as a business manager. But if you are going to have a failure, this is one of the very good kinds to have.

For those compiling the King cat-

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alogue of research dyslexias, this book contains:

A ten-year-old kid with a seven-inch diameter gear wheel in his pocket;

A Walth*a*r, not Walther, pistol with no safety catch;

George Langlahan, rather than George Langelaan, as the author of "The Fly";

"Jimmy-Pete" trucks, as distinguished from GMC Jimmies and Peterbilt Petes, the former a General Motors product, the other manufactured by Pacific Car & Foundry;

"Rio" trucks, as distinguished from the Reo Speedwagon produced long ago by *R*ansom *E.* Olds;

A western writer named Archie Joyceylen, as distinguished from Arch Joscelyn;

A "World War I" Garand rifle, when this was in fact the ubiquitous "M-1" semiautomatic weapon that has left a legacy of arthritic shoulders throughout the ranks of World War *II* infantry veterans.

That's just a sampling, folks, and again I don't know what it means or why his publishers don't catch these things. These are not, mind you, one-shot references; King goes back and reiterates some of them many times. Seems odd, when he's attempting to pay homage to Langelaan, for instance.

For what it's worth, however, I thought I had him on another one —a 28-inch 1930s Schwinn bicycle with "tubeless" tires. Nope; I checked with the factory, and there really was such a thing, and King accurately describes how one would patch such a tire. So it's not an invariable. Or perhaps the memory was dearest here.

David L. Rosheim did not interview me while preparing his book on *Galaxy* Magazine. This strikes me as an oversight, since in 1953 I was the first assistant editor hired by Horace Gold. While I feel I might not have contributed major insights on Gold's editorial style and policies, this led me to look for references to Jerome Bixby, who succeeded me, and Sam Merwin, Jr., who succeeded him. In that case, here were two seasoned professional observers, and Bixby, at least, is still alive. Nada . . . I'm in here only as an author, ditto Bixby, and Merwin is in only as an author of a Galaxy (reprint) Novel.

This tells you something about what Rosheim's book is not. What it is, is what reporters used to call a "think piece" . . . a purely personal reaction, by its author, to a systematic reading of all the issues of *Galaxy* Magazine to date. (In that respect, it is no different a thing from this column, and sometimes no less annoying.)

What it is, is a reference to everything ever printed in *Galaxy*, story by story with the occasional fugue off into Rosheim's opinion and his (then-exhaustive research to find supports for his views.

Once again, Advent:Publishers has

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performed a service to the field, and once again it has found an author who wanted it to. Certainly there has been no thought given to flash or filigree here, nor, truth to tell, to anything more than a fannish overview of one fan's memories. But now at last we have an annotated catalog of *Galaxy*, and that's not a bad idea at all.

The first two Hall of Fame anthologies were comprised of three volumes anthologizing top stories from before the institution of the Nebula Award by the Science Fiction Writers of America. Since then we have had one that used the name on an anthology of Nebula-winning stories, and now we have another.

It seems to me these are qualitatively two different sorts of book. In the instance of the first volumes, the SFWA membership was polled and had the opportunity to ruminate over a lifetime's reading, sometimes at a distance of years that lent enchantment . . . and now and then foreclosed on the security. In the instance of the latter two, the editors were simply(!) required to examine the lists of annual winners and reprint some of the stories, thus ratifying a long-term series of short-term judgments.

I make this point because there is a difference. The annual Nebulas are conditioned by any number of factors to which the entire body of SF is not prey. I would wish that someone like, for example, Dick Lupoff, would put together a parallel series of anthologies of stories that *should* have won the Nebula in their eligible years. (His attempt to do this in relation to the fannish Hugo awards was not long-lived, but it was damned interesting.)

But now I have fallen in with the assumption that the purpose of this book is to provide a documented historical record, as the first two books did. And in fact the purpose of this book is to provide you with some authenticated good reading, one, and to get some royalties into the SFWA treasury, two. The bare record of who won the Nebula in any given year is copiously available elsewhere, as are the annual Nebula winner anthologies, so there is little scholarly value per se in this collection.

Provided you do not have available a set of the annual anthologies, or would like a kind of *Readers' Digest* version, you have come to the right place. These are all brilliant stories, spanning the range of science fiction and fantasy story types. I am particularly taken with Fritz Leiber's "Ill Met in Lankhmar," "The Queen of Air and Darkness" by Poul Anderson, "A Meeting with Medusa" by Arthur C. Clarke, "When it Changed" by Joanna Russ, and Ursula K. LeGuin's "The Day Before the Revolution," for a variety of differing reasons evoked by applications of uncommon talent.

The latest of these stories are from 1974. This seems a decent interval,

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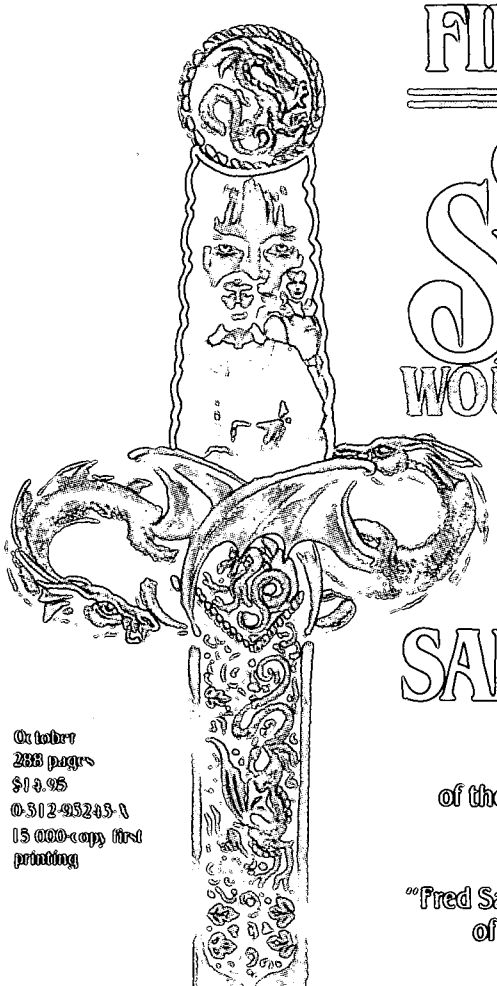

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considering the existence of the annual volumes, and augurs for the appearance of subsequent anthologies of this type. Terry Carr always does a smooth job of editing, there is certainly value for money here, and all's right with the world.

Well, anyhow, although there have been new modes in SF since these awards were given, none of these pieces seems old-fashioned or dependent on my various nostalgias for its effect.

I recommend this book unreservedly. And I assume that some of this money is going to hold the dues cost down to some level attainable by those who need the SFWA most?

CORRECTION

The August *Books* included the statement that writer John Shirley once challenged Harlan Ellison to a literary duel. In fact it was Ellison who issued the challenge to Shirley. F&SF apologizes for the error. Mr. Shirley writes: "My embroglio with Ellison arose from a misunderstanding — the truth is, I have great respect and admiration for Harlan Ellison."

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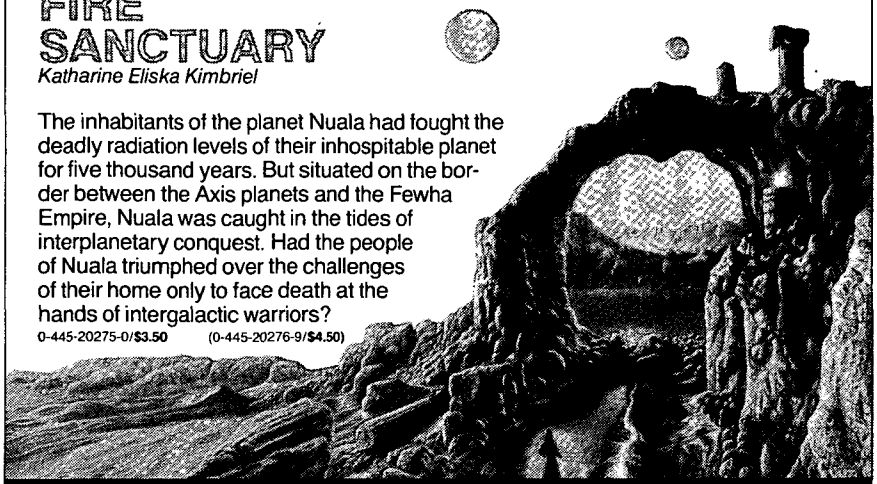

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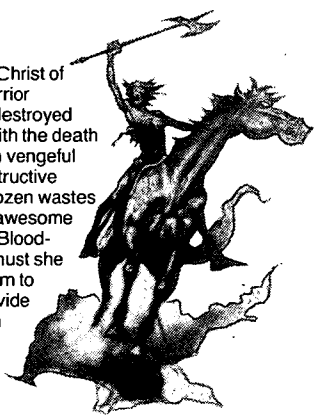

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Gerald Jonas is a staff writer at the New Yorker, *writes educational films on science for high-school students, is the SF reviewer for the* New York Times *and also writes poetry and fiction. The story below is by one or more of those Gerald Jonases, and it may make your head spin.*

The Year All the Kennedy Children Ran for President

BY
GERALD JONAS

—"But tell me, Signor Galileo, how is it that your spyglass enables me to see stars that are not there?"

My head hurts. I'm afraid to move it. I haven't moved my head for so long my neck is stiff. Maybe that's why my head hurts. Sometimes I tell myself that if I can just move my head, the pain will go away. But then I tell myself that unless I keep my head absolutely motionless, it will fall off. Given such contradictory advice, I decide to do nothing, and I keep my head absolutely motionless.

•

Confession time. The reason I stopped moving my head was that I started thinking about the meaning of life, and suddenly I understood what it was all about. I found this paralyzing. I was afraid I'd lose the insight if I did anything rash. I call my insight The Theory-of-the-Many-I's-Inside-the-Head. According to this theory, all our troubles stem from the fact that we insist on thinking of ourselves as individuals when our experience indicates otherwise. Far from being a unitary point of consciousness with a coherent Weltanschauung and a single monthly statement, each of us behaves like a whole crowd of people — confident one moment, depressed the next, in love, then angry, then filled with a sense of unearned contentment. People say, "He's moody." Wrong. It's the other way around. His moods are him. You're probably saying to yourself, "I don't believe a word of this." That's precisely what I said to myself at first. But did I listen?

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A dentist once told me my gums were in lousy shape. And if the gums go, he said, making a little joke, can the teeth be far behind? What should I do? I asked. Brush up and down, not sideways, he said. Brush more, brush harder, brush till it hurts. I tried that, I said, but it hurts. Not really, he said. It doesn't really hurt, you only think it does; your gums are so flabby, so lazy, that they sense any stimulation as pain; so, brush till it hurts and it won't. At first I thought he was crazy. But I tried it, and he was right.

•

All the really great thinkers down through the ages — I mean Philosophy's All-Time Superstars — when confronting the mystery of the soul (or self) have divided it up into parts. Take Plato, for example. Most people would put him in the top five, maybe even the top three, when it comes to day-in, day-out thinking. According to Plato (who wrote a little story, or parable, about it), man has a "tripartite" soul: Will, Appetite, and I forget the third. The details aren't important, as I'll explain in a moment. Aristotle — another biggie — wrote about a vegetable soul, an animal soul, and a mineral soul. Actually, that's a little joke, the last of the dynamic trio was a "rational" soul, although I suspect that Aristotle would have embraced the notion of a mineral soul if he had thought of it first. But if *someone else* had suggested it to him (like, say, Philodendron of Thrace), he would have said, "No way!" and brilliantly demolished the very idea of a mineral soul with the kinds of arguments that make you want to cry because you suspect they're wrong but damned if you can think of a way to convince anyone else. Maybe later that night, just before getting into bed, you come up with a brilliant counterexample, but by that time it's too late: all the philosophers are fast asleep, and only night breezes disturb the deserted porches of the Academy. And even if you remember your counterexample in the morning, the other thinkers have embarked on a long weekend to the islands, and besides you're not so sure now that there isn't an even more brilliant counter-counterexample, so you, as they say, keep your thoughts to yourself.

But what, you ask, are the practical applications (if any) of the Theory-of-the-Many-I's-Inside-the-Head? Well, have you ever shampooed your hair (with a brand called Applessence that you picked up for twenty-cents-off at the local discount store), rinsed off the first lather (which smells a little like hard cider), reached half-blinded by soapy water for the apple-shaped bottle to give yourself a second lathering (the thick, satisfying whipped-cream-like goop you get only the second time around), and "by accident" your hand closes on *another* bottle, this one shaped like a tree stump and called Man-Teak-With-Dandruff-Fighting-

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XT7 (which your kids bought at the local supermarket to get the coupon to enter the Vacation-for-Two-in-Papua-Sweepstakes), and rather than grope again, you go ahead and use it, feeling only a little bit silly about having not one but two weird scents in your hair?

Well, according to the Theory-of-the-Many-I's-Inside-the-Head, your "accidental" grab the second time around was no accident. The first shampoo was the choice of the "I" that likes Applessence (or at least its price), but sometime between the first and second lather, another "I" took control of your head, and this second "I" *wanted* to try Man-Teak-With-Dandruff-Fighting-XT7. While such information may not change your life, it should come in handy the next time you go shopping.

•

As the perspicacious reader has no doubt already noticed, not all of these paragraphs were written by the same "I." The previous paragraph, for example, is clearly the product of a dyspeptic wiseacre who hopes to divert the general public from the point of this story by making light of it. With this transparent maneuver, of course, the perpetrator has unwittingly demonstrated the validity of the very theory he wishes to discredit.

•

Freud understood a thing or two or three. Id, Ego, Superego. He knew there was always someone inside your head looking over your shoulder. Mental contortions. Where Id was, there Ego shall be, not to mention Superego nagging, nagging, nagging. Why did Freud divide the self (or soul) into exactly three parts, instead of four or five or six? Exhaustive research suggests three possible answers: 1) Freud had enough trouble naming Id, Ego and Superego; what would he have called the other parts: Hans? Carl? Anna? 2) Three was good enough for the likes of Plato and Aristotle, so Freud felt comfortable with it. 3) Three was his lucky number.

•

The problem, of course, is consciousness. If there are many "I's" in the head, which one gets to sit in the driver's seat? Take out the garbage? Sign the checks? Is there a rotation system? Ego on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays. Superego on Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. And Id on Saturday night when it's time to boogie. Don't bet on it. Consciousness is the brass ring, and you don't give it up unless you *have* to. It's war in here, man.

•

Confession time. What started my head hurting was an article I read in a magazine about a case of multiple-personality. This kook was so confused he didn't believe he was a-single-coherent-personality-with-occasional-lapses-of-memory-and-sudden-shifts-of-mood-and-an-occasional-inability-to-choose-between-two-divergent-

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courses-of-action-and-chronic-ambivalent-feelings-toward-his-family-and-friends-and-job-like-the-rest-of-us-sane-people. No, this kook insisted that his head contained about eight or ten personalities (not even a sane three, mind you) with real names like Fred and The Kid. And sometimes this kook would be Fred (a responsible, hardworking family man), and then, pow, just like that, he'd become The Kid, a wild, reckless guy who drove too fast and pinched waitresses and ate too many sweets. And what he said, this kook, is that the "spot" would suddenly switch from Fred to The Kid. And by the "spot" what he meant was the spotlight of consciousness. How it happened — what caused the "spot" to switch so suddenly from one personality to another — he didn't know. This kook.

•

When I was young, I often wished my parents had named me Tim. There were times when I *was* Tim. Sometimes, when I wasn't Tim, I felt bad about it, wondering where he was, how he was doing. I would have written him a letter, but I didn't know how to address it.

•

A name is a kind of story. I once knew a writer who said. "The only kind of story I like to write is the kind of story I hate to read." So he used a pseudonym.

•

If you want to, you can think of the Many-I's-Inside-the-Head as subprograms of the metacomputer known as the soul or the self. If you don't want to, don't. According to a recent survey, eight out of ten people admitted that they didn't understand the words *subprogram, metacomputer,* and *soul. Everyone* understood *self, head,* and *I.*

•

A head is real because you can hold it in your hands. The brain is real because you can hold it in your head. Something inside the brain makes up stories about the fireworks that fizz and boom from one end of the nervous system to the other. A name is a story. A mood is a story. An obsession is a story. Einstein's General Theory of Relativity is a story. Darwin told a great story. Evolutionarily speaking, some stories work out better than others. The question is, better for whom? Fred? The Kid? Tim?

The problem, or course, is death. According to a recent survey, there are at least three kinds of death to worry about: 1) The death of an "I," as in "I don't love you anymore." This is sometimes called "giving up" or "growing up." 2) The death of consciousness, as when the spot suddenly deserts one personality and there is no replacement ready. This is sometimes called "ecstasy" or "insanity." 3) Death with a capital *D.* If life is a story, this is The End.

•

The point of this story is to get all

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this stuff out of my head so that I can move it again. At first I was going to call this story "Stories" to emphasize the point, but then I thought: What if someone says, This isn't really a story, this kook really *believes* all this stuff about the Theory-of-the-Many-I's-Inside-the Head? So I made up a title that has nothing to do with the point except, of course, on a deep symbolic level.

•

I also made up the epigraph.

•

I feel better already. How do you feel?

"Rodman has a marvelous green thumb. He can grow things anywhere!"

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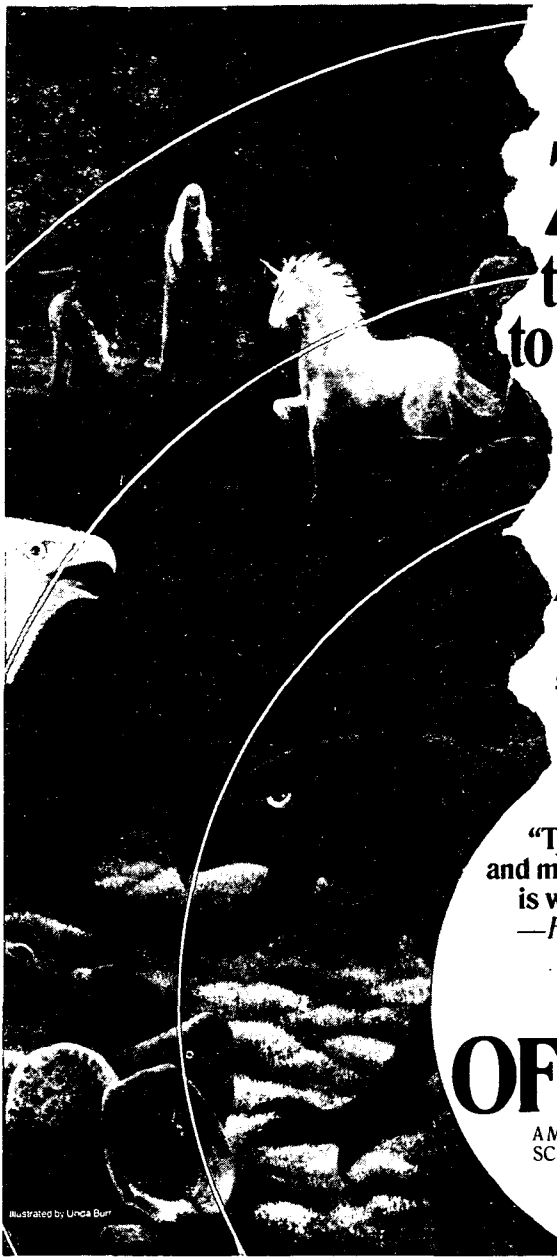

Roger Zelazny

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Bradley Denton's last story here was "In the Fullness of Time" (May 1986); his first novel, WRACK & ROLL, was just published by Popular Library/Questar. His new story concerns farming in Kansas, a tough enough proposition without an influx of strange and deadly trespassers. . .

Killing Weeds

BY
BRADLEY DENTON

Monday. Dad bangs on my bedroom door at five-thirty and calls, "Up an' at 'em, Phillie." I'm already dressed, though, and sitting on the edge of the bed to put on my oldest pair of tennies. The smell of bacon told me it was time. It's Dad's first full day back from summer camp, and we have a lot to do. Knowing him, I'll bet he's already fed and watered the calves in the lot behind the barn.

I go to my dresser to get the birthday presents he brought me — a camouflage jacket and a mother-of-pearl-handled four-blade pocketknife. I turned twelve last week while he was out in western Kansas teaching guys how to shoot howitzers. Seems like my birthday always falls during summer camp.

I complained about that to Mom, and she laughed, saying it was "an appropriate tradition."

"After all," she told me, "he was off being a soldier when you were born, too."

That started her on the story about how they got engaged just before Dad was drafted, and how after a year Grandma gave her the money to fly to Manila so she could marry him while he was on leave. "And that's how we picked your name," she always says at the end. It's her favorite story, and I've heard it at least a thousand times. Dad rolls his eyes every time she tells it when he's around.

This year he called from Fort Riley and told me that 1980 is a turning point for me. Whenever he's gone now, he says, I'm the man of the family.

Mom smiled her that's-nice-dear smile when I told her that. She thinks I'm still her baby, and won't even let me run the old John Deere 50 unless

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Dad's here to watch.

I heard them arguing about that last night, just two hours after he got home. I listened at the furnace vent in my bedroom floor.

"Most twelve-year-olds have been running tractors by themselves for three years already," Dad said.

"Most twelve-year-olds aren't as small as he is," Mom said.

"What does that have to do with it?" Dad asked, almost yelling. "Hell, he's damn near as good with the Allis as I am, and all I'm suggesting is that he could run the Deere with the weed-wiper or bear-bar once in a while."

"The bean-buggy, maybe, since somebody else has to be there anyway, but not the pipewick. I don't want him out in the field by himself."

"Yeah, and that's why we've got this weed problem."

"No, dear, that's because your wonderful cousin didn't take care of it two weeks ago like he said he would."

There was a long stretch of silence then, and finally Dad said, "You sound like you think that's my fault."

"I can't count how many times you've called Billy unreliable," Mom said. "We've got to face facts, Loren —if we want the farm to work, you'd better quit the Guard."

"You know damn well the only reason we haven't gone under is my Guard pay."

"Then maybe we should get jobs in town."

"Just like that, huh? They're handing them out like candy at a parade, are they?"

"We could try. We can't hold onto the farm forever, and you can't pretend everything'd be all right if only I'd let poor little Philip drive the tractors while you're out Guarding."

I was so mad at Mom that I got into bed and put the pillow over my head so I couldn't hear her anymore.

It's not my fault I'm not built big, like Dad is. Maybe I would be if Mom would get me that Olympic weight set I keep asking for.

But, hell, I don't need muscles to run a tractor. On a tractor I'm as strong as anybody.

"Get down here and eat your breakfast, you lazy kids," Dad yells from downstairs. I slip my new knife into my back pocket and put on the camouflage jacket. It'll be too hot for it in a few hours, but I want to wear it while I can.

I beat Jodi downstairs, and she screams that I pushed her. Mom is busy trying to get Crissy to stop crying, though, so she tells Jodi to shut up, sit down, and eat her eggs. Jodi whines, but Mom gives her the no-back-talk-or-else look. Jodi is eight, but she acts like as much of a baby as Crissy, who is three.

Dad is already sitting at the head of the kitchen table, chewing a mouthful of bacon and listening to the morning news and farm report on WIBW-Topeka. He winks at me when

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I sit down, and I dig in to catch up.

"Where's Patricia?" he asks after a minute.

I swallow a big glug of milk to wash down a lump of toast. "Still in bed, I guess. Want me to go get her?"

He shakes his head. "No, Jodi'd better do it."

Jodi whines, "Oh, Daddeee, I just sat dowwwwwn."

"You get upstairs and get your sister, or you won't be able to sit down at all, young lady."

I stuff a bunch of scrambled eggs into my mouth so I won't laugh.

Jodi stomps upstairs, clomp clomp clomp on the wooden steps, and the noise makes Crissy cry louder.

"Jodi Lee Bundy, you straighten up or you'll wish you had!" Mom yells.

Mom is in a bad mood. I think it's because of the argument. Or maybe it's just because Crissy is screeching her stupid pink head off.

Dad and I finish our breakfasts, and then we grab our Co-Op hats and walk out across the packed dirt of the barnyard to the west shop. The sun is just coming up, all orangey over the thick band of trees down in the Coal Creek valley a mile east, and the eighty-acre soybean field just this side of the creek looks like a giant, dark green carpet. There's some low, wispy fog down by the trees, but it looks like the field itself will be fairly dry. It's been five days since the last rain, and that wasn't much.

The calves in the pen behind the barn start bawling when they hear us. Dad says, "Sounds like your sisters," and makes me laugh.

He shoves open the west shop's big sliding door, and the corrugated metal rumbles like thunder. The six-row planter, the chisel-plow, the pipewick rig, and the bean-buggy—the bar folded in the middle so that the two pairs of fiberglass seats are facing each other — are lined up against one wall, and most of the rest of the shop is taken up by the John Deere and the big diesel Allis-Chalmers, its front-loader raised high.

I notice for the first time that the collapsed sunshade-umbrellas on the bean-buggy look like furled flags.

Dad stands with his hands on his hips for a few seconds, "sizing up the situation" like he always does.

"Tell you what," he says, hitching up his jeans a little. "You check the 50's oil and gas her up. By the time you've done that, I'll have the Allis out of the way so we can manhandle the bean-bar and hook 'er up."

"You got it," I say, like I imagine his troops saying when he gives them an order, and I run over to the old green John Deere. The oil is fine, so I climb up into the seat, pull the hand clutch, and hit the starter. It takes the engine a half minute of cranking, but then it fires up, blup-blup-blup-blup-blupblupblupblup. I put it in first gear, cut back the throttle, and ease

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out of the shop nice and slow. I hope Mom's looking out the kitchen window.

I keep the tractor in first as I drive past the barn toward the east shop. The sun is up over the trees now, and I have to squint.

I fill the 50 from the three-hundred-gallon gas tank outside the east shop, and it makes me feel good when I glance back and see that Dad isn't bothering to keep an eye on me. A few months ago, even, he would've watched to make sure I didn't use the diesel tank.

I feel the vibration in my chest when he starts the Allis and backs it into the barnyard. It's as big as an armored personnel carrier.

It takes Dad awhile to get the buggy coupled to the Deere — the hookup's more complicated than most, because the buggy has to stick out in *front* of the tractor — and then he's got to mix the herbicide and water in the buggy's seventy-five-gallon plastic tank. After that he has to tinker with the compressor and test all the wands, so by the time we're finally ready to go, it's after eight o'clock. I've been playing mumblety-peg in the barnyard with my new knife, but now I put it back into my pocket and run to the house to see if the others are ready.

Dad drives the 50 with the folded-up buggy a half-mile south down the dirt road to the bean field gate, and the rest of us follow on foot.

Patricia is complaining. She's a year younger than me, and as far as I can tell, she's not good for much except teaching Jodi how to whine. "If we weren't going to have to be ready until *now*," she says, "why'd we have to get up at *five-thirty*?"

"You didn't get up at five-thirty," I tell her. "Everybody else did, but not you."

"Oh, well, you're *per-fect*, aren't you, Phil-ip?" she says, mostly through her nose.

"Both of you shut up," Mom says. She's carrying Crissy to keep the kid from crying, and she isn't happy about it.

By the time we catch up to Dad at the edge of the field, he's got the halves of the bean-bar folded out and locked in place. Now the tractor-plus-buggy rig is shaped like a T, with the bear-bar forming the crosspiece. A couple of the hoses to the wands are tangled, so I straighten them out.

"Attaboy," Dad says, talking loudly so I can hear him over the idling tractor.

Patricia gives me a dirty look.

Mom puts a cutesy little sunbonnet on Crissy, and Dad takes the kid up onto the tractor seat with him. The rest of us take the four bean-bar seats — Mom and Jodi on the left side of the tractor, Patricia and I on the right. Mom and I have the outside seats, the best ones, and we both open our sun umbrellas.

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"O.K.," Dad shouts, idling the Deere a little further. "Be sure to aim low for the cockleburs. Don't get any on the bean plants if you can help it. Forget about the volunteer corn; I'll have to get it with the wiper after I take care of the milo."

"O.K., Dad!" I answer, and pop the four-foot wand out of its bracket on the side of my seat. It feels good in my hand. Broadleaf weeds, prepare to die.

"Patricia Kay and Jodi Lee, put up your sunshades!" Mom yells.

"Oh, Mo-ther!" Patricia whines. "It's chilly out here as it is."

"Put up your sunshades *now*," Mom says.

"But I want to get a tan!" Patricia whines.

"Me, too!" Jodi says, like an echo.

"I'll tan both your butts if you don't do what your mother says," Dad hollers, and I can't help laughing.

"You be quiet," Mom tells me.

Brat One and Brat Two finally open their umbrellas, and Dad cranks up the Deere and takes us into the beans.

I aim the wand carefully and squeeze the trigger. A faintly purplish, fan-shaped spray shoots from the nozzle, spitting death onto the nutrient-sucking cockleburs and morning glories that are trying to take over our field.

The soybean plants are over a foot high, which means we're doing this about three weeks later than we should be. But all through the second half of June, the big Angus steers kept getting out of the north pasture, and Dad and I had to fix over a quarter-mile of fence. By the time we finished that, it was time for Guard summer camp, and another two weeks were lost. Dad's cousin Billy was supposed to weed-wipe the milo, at least, but, like Dad says, counting on Billy is like a legless man trying to count on his toes.

It ought to be all right, though. We might lose a little yield in both the beans and milo, but it's not going to be a disaster. Just like everybody else, Dad says, we do the best we can —and you can't do any more than that. In about a week, we'll have 160 acres of prairie hay ready to mow a few miles west of here, but if this spraying isn't done by then, the hay'll have to wait.

The beans really need the help. There are so many cockleburs crowding up against the stems of the plants that I have to keep my spray going constantly. It's not hard, since I can switch hands, but the job was more fun last year. Then the weeds weren't as thick and I had more opportunity to develop my aim. It became a game to see whether I could hit the cockleburs without getting any of the spray on the bean plants or the ground. I had to stay alert.

This year, though, there's no variety, and the grumble of the tractor

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and the perpetual hiss of the wands combine into a monotonous hum that makes me drowsy. As the sun rises higher and the air gets warmer, the smells of gasoline, herbicide, and bean plants swirl together and almost put me over the edge into sleep.

But then the rig jerks and stops, and even though we've been going real slow, I have to grab my chair to keep from falling off. I hear Jodi shriek, and I see that she's taken a tumble. She isn't hurt, because it's only two and a half feet to the ground, but she's plenty mad. If I'd been driving, I'd be getting an earful about now.

I look back at Dad as he cuts the tractor engine.

"What is it, Loren?" Mom asks, and she sounds so worried that I begin to feel worried myself, even though I don't know why I should.

"Quiet," Dad says, and stands up, holding Crissy against his chest. She yowls, and he puts his hands over her mouth.

"What for?" Patricia asks.

Dad takes his hand away from Crissy's mouth and points toward the north end of the field. "There," he says. "Do you see something moving down there?"

All I can see are soybeans.

"What am I supposed to be looking for?" Jodi asks, sounding really hacked-off.

"Don't speak to your father in that tone of voice," Mom says.

Dad is squinting, searching the field. "Somebody's in the beans."

"I don't see anything, dear," Mom says.

Dad shakes his head. "You don't know how to look."

"Maybe it was a coyote," I say.

Dad doesn't answer.

"Philip's probably right," Mom says. "A coyote could be staying low, or could even be in the trees by now."

Dad frowns, then sits down and restarts the tractor.

We continue spraying the rows of beans. Crissy continues bawling.

It's after ten-thirty and we're working about sixty yards from the trees when Dad kills the engine for the second time.

"Listen," he tells us, and this time we all hear it. Someone is shooting a rifle down by the creek, on our land. The sharp cracks come quickly, one every eight or nine seconds.

I feel like hitting something. We've posted signs on all the fences: NO HUNTING; NO TRESPASSING. Yet some illiterate fools, as Dad calls them, are down there anyway, looking to get us or our cattle killed.

"Goddamn it," Dad says, and gets down from the tractor, leaving Crissy squalling on the seat.

"Loren, I've asked you not to curse in front of the children," Mom says.

"Yeah, Dad," Patricia says, smirking. "After all, Jodi and I have Bible

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school this afternoon. And then we're going to see Aunt Sue, and you know what she always says about swear words."

I was through with Bible school last year, thank goodness. I don't care if I never see construction paper or hear another verse of "This Little Light of Mine" for the rest of my life.

Mom glares at Patricia, and if she weren't so far away, I think she'd smack her. "When I want a comment from you, young lady, I'll ask for it," Mom says.

Dad begins walking toward the trees.

"Loren," Mom says, "just what do you think you're doing?"

Dad slows and half-turns back toward us. "I'm going to politely tell them to get the hell out. Be right back."

I hesitated for a second, knowing that I'll get in trouble with Mom, and then I jump down from the bean-buggy and run after Dad. Mom yells for me to come-back-this-instant, but I pretend I don't hear her. She has to take the girls to Topeka in a few hours, and by the time she gets back she won't be mad anymore.

I catch up with Dad at the edge of the field. He asks, "Who invited you?" but doesn't tell me to go back, so I head into the trees with him.

It's shady and shadowy in here, a jungle of walnut and hedge apple trees, climbing ivy, and gooseberry bushes. I remember that Mom promised to make gooseberry pies if I can ever get my sisters to help pick.

The gunfire sounds really close now. Dad yells "Heyyyy!" between each shot, to let the illiterate fools know we're looking for them, but no one answers.

We find the three of them on an old cow path near the creek. They're standing in a patch of shade that half-hides their faces, but it looks to me like one is ancient, one is about Dad's age, and one is only a few years older than me. They're all dressed alike, in hunting vests and caps of such a dark brown that they almost look black. You'd think the illiterate fools would wear something bright to keep from shooting each other. Each one carries a rifle.

Now that we've stopped moving, I realize for the first time how steamy it is down here. My camouflage jacket feels hot and itchy. Gnats are trying to fly into my ears, and when I slap them away it sounds like a bomb has gone off in my head.

"Howdy," Dad says to the strangers, being polite just like he said he'd be.

The oldest one is chewing snuff, and he spits before answering. "Howdy," he says, but he doesn't sound friendly. I don't think he has any teeth. "How're y'all doin' today?" His voice gives him away as being from Texas or somewhere else south of here.

"Just fine," Dad says, stepping a

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little closer to them. I hang back, not because I'm scared, but because Dad's in charge. "My family and I are spraying our beans, and we heard your guns."

"Uh-huh," the old man says, shifting his snuff. "What you sprayin' 'em with?"

Dad doesn't answer for a few seconds, but then he says, "2,4-DB."

The old man makes a snorting noise and spits again. "Why don't y'just use sugar water? Ain't gonna stop nothin' unless you use somethin' with some kick to it."

Dad seems to grow a few inches. "I use what most folks around here use for cockleburs."

"If you say so, Joe. Sorry if we made too much noise."

"Well, that's all right," Dad says, "but I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to go somewhere else."

"We're hunting whitetails," the one Dad's age says. "Cain't seem to find any, though."

Dad's supermad now; I can tell by the way his jaw sticks out farther. "In the first place," he says, "it ain't deer season; and in the second place, you don't have permission to hunt here. You've blown off at least thirty rounds in the last minute and a half, and that's too damn dangerous with people so close."

"Thought we might as well shoot some squirrels," the youngest says.

Dad takes a deep breath. "I hear any more of it, I'm calling the sheriff."

The old man swallows loudly, and grunts. "Everybody 'round here as unfriendly as you, Joe?"

Dad stiffens. "My name ain't Joe," he says, and turns to look straight at me. I can see in his eyes that he wants me to get back to the field *now*.

I turn and head back, fast.

"Nice lookin' boy," I hear the oldest hunter say. "What is he — eight, nine?"

I'm smashing through bushes now, but I can still hear Dad say, "I want your names."

"Charlie," the old man answers.

I find another cow path and head toward the field. My run slows to a walk, but my heart still feels like a sledgehammer hitting stone. Something moves in the weeds at the edge of the path, and I remember Dad saying that there are copperheads down here. I wish I were wearing something tougher than almost-worn-out tennies.

An oval piece of tire tread, about nine inches long and four wide, is lying in the middle of the path. I pick it up with my right hand and slap the tread against my left palm. I LEFT my job, I LEFT my wife, I LEFT my friends, I LEFT for life—

I'm worried about Dad, and I think maybe I should go back to him, but I don't know what I could do if I did. I'm too goddamn small. A twelve-year-old should weigh more than seventy pounds.

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I step out into the field about thirty yards north of where Mom is standing with her arms crossed. Patricia, Jodi, and Crissy are still on the bean-buggy.

"Where's your father?" Mom demands as she walks toward me.

"Talking to the hunters," I say. My voice sounds high-pitched and thin.

"What's he saying to them?" Mom asks. "What are they doing here? What's that in your hand?"

I don't try to answer everything. I just say, "A piece of tire I found."

Mom frowns at the chunk of rubber. "How on earth did a tire get into all that brush?"

Then, as if by magic, Dad is with us. I didn't even hear him coming out of the trees.

"Let me see that," he says, and I hand him the piece of tire.

He looks at it for a long time, and the longer he looks, the madder his eyes get. I feel like something is my fault, and I have to look away from his face. My eyes focus on the tire chunk and I notice for the first time that there are four dirt-clogged holes near the edges of the rubber, two toward each end of the oval.

"What happened in there?" Mom asks.

Dad doesn't answer. After another couple of seconds, he turns and throws the piece of tire back into the trees.

After we've had lunch and Mom has taken the girls to town, Dad mixes glyphosate herbicide in the pipewick's two fifty-gallon tanks, then hitches the wiper to the back of the big orange Allis. He's put new ropes through the grommets in the twenty-foot horizontal plastic pipe, and he lets me use my birthday knife to trim the ends. You have to be sure that enough rope sticks out of each hole so that you get most of the Johnsongrass, but not so much rope that you're dripping a lot of poison onto the milo — sorghum, some people call it.

When Dad kicks up the idle on the Allis, thick black smoke spurts from the exhaust, making the barnyard smell "like a truck stop." Then he touches one of the hydraulic-control levers, lowering the front-loader a few feet so he can see where he's going.

"Ought to take the damn thing off," he says, "but it's too much trouble. Besides, I've been thinking that I might spread some new gravel on the driveway."

Everything that needs doing around here, Dad can do. And does.

I ride on the tractor with him, sitting on the built-in toolbox (which Dad welded into place himself) beside the right fender. As we roar down the road past the soybean field, I can see waves of heat jiggling over the beans nearest the trees. I take off my camouflage jacket and tie its arms around my waist.

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The road curves around Bald Hill, which blocks my view of the bean field, and then we chug down into the creek valley and across the low-water bridge. Dad slows the Allis way down and stares off down the creek as we cross the bridge. I think his mind's still on the hunters.

The canopy of trees over the muddy little strip of water reminds me of a tunnel. There is a stink of something dead here. A muskrat, maybe.

The trees thin out again a few dozen yards past the bridge, and the first of our two sixty-acre milo fields comes into view. It seems less orderly than the bean field, because the beans are all in neat rows, while this looks like a prairie of thick-stemmed, foot-and-a-half-high grass. Actually, the milo is planted in rows, too — it's just not so obvious from the road.

A lot of taller, scroungier-looking grass is scattered throughout the field, sticking up from six to ten inches above the crop. This stuff is Johnsongrass, and if we don't get rid of it, it'll rob the milo of nutrients just like the cockleburs are robbing the soybeans.

Dad sizes up the situation and shakes his head. "Hope we aren't too late," he says, and eases the tractor and weed-wiper across the shallow ditch into the field.

Once he opens the tank valve so that the herbicide will drip off the ropes, there isn't much to do except drive slowly up and down the field over and over again, making sure we don't miss anything or overlap the previous strip too much. Grasshoppers fly up in front of us like tiny helicopters trying to escape the enormous, crushing wheels.

After turning to start the fourth pass, Dad takes a thin cigar from his shirt pocket and lights it with a butane lighter, filling my nose with the smell of sweet tobacco. Mom won't let him smoke anywhere near her. I watch the slim brown stick burn all the way down until there's less than an inch left, and I can tell that Dad really enjoys it. He stubs it out on the left fender and tosses it into the field, then winks at me.

I know what he means: This is our little secret.

The afternoon gets to be a "real steamer" the closer we get to the creek, but we've got a three-gallon cooler of iced tea with us. If you tossed back enough ice tea, Dad says, you could march across the Sahara Desert with a full pack and come out the other side ready to put a fence around the whole thing.

I wish I could think up the kind of stuff he can.

I also wish I could be more help. All I'm doing is riding up here beside him, as if that were work. I could run the Allis and weed-wiper well enough to do the whole field myself if I had to, leaving Dad free to finish the beans — but with the women in town, we don't have enough people to ride the bean-bar. Dad considered

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hiring some kids for a couple of dollars an hour, but decided that we can't afford it. We'll get it done ourselves, he says, or we won't get it done at all.

We'll make it. We'll wipe every goddamn weed off every goddamn acre, and come fall we'll bring in the best crop we've ever had. Wait and see.

About two o'clock, Dad stops the tractor and stands up, staring off toward the trees, which are about a hundred yards away.

"You see that?" he says, and points.

I climb up to stand on the right fender. I look where he's pointing, and I see a movement in the milo.

"Think it's another coyote?" I ask, and then I see something rise above the green. It looks like a flattened cone made of straw.

I give a yell, but it's already gone. We keep watching for a few minutes, but the only motion in the milo is from a weak puff of west wind.

Dad sits down again and looks at me, his eyes serious. "What did you see?" he asks.

I tell him, and his jaw widens and sticks out the way it does when he's just about mad enough to break something. For a minute I'm afraid that I'm in trouble, but then he says, O.K., Phillie. You keep an eye out, and if you see anything else, you holler."

He starts the Allis moving again, and I watch carefully, imagining myself as an army scout. The wind picks up a little. About three o'clock I think I see someone in black clothes running beside the trees, but then I decide that it's a shadow caused by the wind moving a bough.

I don't see anything else the rest of the afternoon. Except the grasshoppers.

We have one breakdown, a flat tire on the weed-wiper a little after four. The wiper's three tires are the same size as the Allis's front two, though, and Dad keeps a spare bolted behind the seat. We change the flat and keep working for another three hours.

We show up for supper about a quarter to eight, and Mom's upset because she *told* us she'd have the roast ready at seven. Usually she wouldn't think anything of Dad's being a little late — breakdowns happen, and things almost always take longer than planned, and she knows that. The only thing I can figure is that she's still mad because of their argument over me.

I'd still be wearing a diaper if she had her way.

Patricia is whining that she wants to go "swim-ming" tomorrow, and Jodi won't shut up about the Walls of Jericho, which was her Bible school lesson today. When I ask her to please be quiet, she takes the red plastic trumpet they gave her and blows it in my face. Dad takes it away and tells

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her that even Joshua wasn't allowed to blow his horn at the table.

Crissy giggles, although I doubt that she understood a word of it, and burbles mashed potatoes down her front. Mom yanks her out of the high chair and drags her to the bathroom by one arm. The kid starts screaming. I hate it when stuff like that happens at a meal, because then I don't even want to eat anymore.

Dad cleans his plate and gets up from the table.

"Going to wipe some more?" I ask, scooping my corn and potatoes into a pile so I can wolf them down. I figure he'll want to go back to the milo for at least another two hours, working by the bright lights on the Allis.

He puts on his Co-Op hat and shrugs. "I'd better fix that tire first. I won't have time in the morning, and we might need a spare before the day's out. You go ahead and finish your supper, then take care of the calves. Patricia, you can give him a hand."

"You got it," I say.

"Oh, Dad-deee," Patricia whines. "I told Tee-na I'd call her after supper."

Dad heads for the back door. "You can still do that if it's not too late after you help with the calves."

"But Dad-deee—"

Dad turns around and comes back to the table. He grabs Patricia by the shoulders and shakes her.

"Not . . . one . . . more . . . god . . . damn . . . word," he says. It scares me a little even though I'm not the one he's mad at.

You better believe Patricia shuts up. If Mom would only crack down on her like that, the brat might actually turn into a decent human being.

Dad goes out to fix the tire, and Jodi sings, "Patti got in trou-ble, Patti got in trou-ble—"

Patricia hits her on the head, and Jodi shrieks.

"Behave out there or you'll wish you had!" Mom yells from the bathroom.

Patricia gets up from her chair, goes behind Jodi, and clamps her left hand over the younger brat's mouth while using her right hand to yank on Jodi's ponytail.

"Stop it," I tell Patricia.

She sneers at me. I get up, go around the table, and pull her hand away from Jodi's mouth. Jodi bellows for Mom.

"That's enough!" Mom yells from the bathroom.

Patricia swings at me, but I block it with my left arm. She's almost two inches taller than me, but I'm older and she's just a girl. If she keeps trying to fight, I'll pound her into the floor.

"I hate you!" she whispers. "I hate you, you little Phillie-baby!"

I walk away from her and get my Co-Op hat from its nail. "Let's feed the calves," I say.

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"You're not the boss of me," Patricia says. "You're not the boss of *any*thing!"

I give her the look I've practiced in my mirror, Dad's don't-mess-with-me-now look.

"I'm going to feed the calves," I say. "You can help like Dad said or you can get your butt spanked." And then I head out the door.

She comes out to the barn after I've already filled two buckets with grain. She gives me a dirty look, but then she picks up one of the buckets and lugs it out toward the pen. She looks bow-legged and funny, and I laugh at her.

After taking care of the calves, I find Dad in the east shop. The sun is going down, so he has the lights on inside.

The weed-wiper's tire is one of the old kind, with a tube, and Dad already has it taken apart. He's holding the tube in a rusty fifty-five-gallon barrel half-full of water, and when I come close I see several streams of bubbles breaking at the water's surface as fast as machine-gun fire. A section of the tube as big as one of Dad's hands is riddled with holes.

"What the heck could've done that?" I ask.

Dad doesn't answer me, or even look at me. His eyes are fixed on the froth of exploding bubbles.

"I mean," I say, feeling nervous, "could it've been a knot of barbed wire?"

Dad lets go of the tube, and it pops to the surface, hissing. Then he turns away and goes to his cluttered workbench, water dripping from his fingers to form a dotted trail on the concrete floor.

"Can you patch it?" I ask.

He wipes his hands on a dirty red shop rag and then takes an old, torn inner tube from one of the hooks above the workbench. He tosses it toward me, and it lands at my feet.

"We'll give it a try," he says. "Cut a patch big enough to cover those holes, plus about a half-inch extra on every side."

I take out my birthday knife, open the second-biggest blade, and sit down on the floor to get to work. While I'm cutting, Dad takes the punctured tube from the water and dries it.

By the time I bring the patch to the workbench, Dad's buffed the rubber around the holes and is brushing on the cement. He takes the patch from me, nods — meaning that I did a good job — and presses it down over the holes with the heel of his right hand. Then he takes two small pieces of scrap rubber, puts one over the patch and the other on the other side of the tube, and clamps the whole mess in the vise on the end of the bench.

"That ought to do it," I say.

Dad looks at his watch and says, "Twenty to ten, Phillie-boy. Better take your bath and read your Bible

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verses before your momma comes out and hauls you in by the left ear."

I shuffle backward toward the shop doorway. "You gonna go back out to the milo?" I ask.

Dad is standing by the barrel and looking down at the water, even though there's nothing in it now.

"No," he says, his voice real quiet. "No, I've got some shop work."

"What?" I ask, because I can't think of anything besides the tire.

He looks up from the barrel and frowns at me. "Didn't I tell you to get to the house?" he says, and this time his tone of voice says I'd better hurry.

After my bath, I sit in my pajamas in the living room, and Jodi reads tonight's verses. She has to raise her voice because the box fan is roaring in the doorway, trying to dilute the heat the house has built up over the day.

The verses Mom has Jodi read are the ones about the woman named Rahab who helped the Israelite spies escape from Jericho, and I guess the point must be that if you do a good deed, you'll be rewarded. The spies promised Rahab that the Israelites would spare her and her family if she kept the scarlet escape cord in the window as a sign, and she followed their instructions. That turned out to be the smart thing to do, because everybody else in the city was slain "with the edge of the sword."

I glanced at Mom when the story is almost over. She's looking at the dark picture window instead of at Jodi, which is strange. Usually she's real attentive when we're reading Scripture, so as to correct our pronunciation. When Patricia asks a question about why the Israelites wanted to attack the city in the first place, Mom says something about Communism, then tells us that we've read enough for tonight and had better go to bed.

I use my flashlight to read comics under the covers until my eyes itch, and then I lie awake and listen to night sounds. Frogs are chirruping somewhere close.

After a while I hear a buzz-buzz-buzzing that isn't like the sound insects make, so I sit up and pull back the curtains from my window. If I peer between two branches of the cedar tree, I can see the east shop from here. Yellow light spills from the shop's doorway into the barnyard, and as I watch, white flashes wash out the yellow for a split second at a time.

Dad is arc-welding something. I lie back and wonder what it could be.

Something to make work more efficient, I'll bet. He's good at stuff like that.

Tuesday. There are no gunshots today, so for a long time nothing interrupts the monotony. After a few hours of riding on the bean-bar, I feel as if the entire world is made of soybeans, weeds, sunlight, and bugs.

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Still, the work seems to go faster than it did yesterday, even though the weeds are just as thick. If all goes well, we should be able to finish spraying the beans by early afternoon, or by midmorning tomorrow at the latest.

Of course, all doesn't go well. Dad likes to quote what he calls Old MacDonald's Corollary to Murphy's Law: "If anything can possibly go wrong, it'll go wrong on a farm." Today, Old MacDonald's Corollary attacks us a little after eleven and clogs up a valve on the sprayer's compressor. Dad tries to fix it, but a hose splits when he reclamps it. So it's a job for the shop, and we have to abandon the soybeans until tomorrow.

But Mom has brought along some grocery sacks, so the morning won't be a total loss. By the time my sisters and I have picked enough gooseberries for a couple of pies, she says, she'll have lunch ready.

That sounds great to me, but naturally, Patricia and Jodi start whining.

"Moh-um," Patricia says, "I'm not wearing any bug spray. I'll get bit-ten. And I'll get poison i-vy, tooo."

"Meeee tooooo," Jodi pouts.

"So go home," I say, disgusted. "I can pick enough for five pies all by myself."

Dad stands up from where he's been squatting beside the compressor and wipes his hands on his jeans. "Take the girls on back to the house," he says to Mom. "I can't mess with this piece of junk until tonight anyway, so I'll help Phillie pick berries until lunchtime."

Crissy is bounding up and down on the tractor seat. "Me pick! Me pick!" she yelps, spit bubbling at the corners of her mouth.

"You're too little," I tell her, and she glares at me and screams.

So Mom and the two older girls walk back to the house, and the three-year-old, who will only be in the way, comes with Dad and me to pick gooseberries. She rides on Dad's shoulders, looking down at me triumphantly and chewing on one of her bonnet's ribbons.

I begin sweating the instant we enter the creek's miniature jungle, and I think back to yesterday, when Dad and I found the hunters. I was sweating then, too, but the three trespassers looked cool and calm, as if they were copperheads in human form.

We find a clump of heavily laden gooseberry bushes surrounding a walnut tree, and I reach in carefully to pluck the marble-sized green fruit while avoiding the prickles. I pop the first berry into my mouth and burst it with my back teeth. The juice that squirts over my tongue is so sour that it makes me shiver.

Dad puts Crissy down beside me, then goes to the other side of the tree to work on different bush. "Looks like we done struck the mother lode, Phillie-boy," he says as he begins to pick.

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Crissy reaches for a cluster of berries and immediately gets stuck by the prickles. She shrieks as if she'd just been bitten by a snake.

Dad comes back around and picks her up, then bounces her in his arms until she stops crying. Once that's accomplished, he puts her down again, spreads his handkerchief on the ground several feet away, and tells her to sit on it. She grins and plunks her rump down, more or less on the handkerchief.

Dad and I pick gooseberries, and he whistles a tune he says is from a movie called *The Bridge on the River Kwai.* I've never seen it, but he says he'll let me stay up the next time it comes on. It sounds like fun.

We pick and pick and pick, until the world becomes gooseberries and thorns in the same way that it became beans and weeds earlier this morning. I eat about every tenth berry, and feel as though I'm at the center of a ball of sourness.

Then Dad's hand is on my shoulder, shaking me back to the trees and the heat.

"Where's your sister?" he asks.

I look at the spot where he left her. The handkerchief is still there, but Crissy is gone.

I open my mouth to yell for her, but Dad tells me to stay quiet and listen.

For several long moments I hear nothing but birds, bugs, frogs, and rustling animals. Then, so faintly that I think I might be imagining it, I hear a faraway baby-giggle. Dad takes off running between the bushes and trees.

I leave my sack of gooseberries and follow him, but I can't keep up. After a few seconds I can only see flashes of his blue cotton shirt among the leaves and shadows. He's heading for the creek.

Sweat stings my eyes, and my chest hurts. I'm afraid of stepping on a copperhead, and I wish Crissy had never been born.

At last I stumble through a clot of weeds and thistles, scratching my arms and face, and find myself standing on a flat, mossy rock on the bank of Coal Creek. Dad is several feet in front of me at the edge of the water, his boots sunk to the eyelets in mud.

Crissy stands in the center of the shallow creek, dark water halfway up her baby-fat thighs. She's grinning proudly and using both hands to hold a broad, shallow straw cone on her head. Her bonnet is gone.

"Daddy!" she yelps in delight. "See Cwissy's hat!"

Dad stands perfectly still, his arms at his sides. I can't see his face.

"Where did you find that?" he asks in a voice that's almost a whisper. It's only because the air is so still that I can hear him at all.

Crissy dances in the water, splashing.

"Pajama man!" she cries.

It's as if the words break a spell.

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Dad strides toward her, murky waves rippling out before him, and when he reaches her, he yanks the hat away and throws it. It lands upside down in the water fifteen or twenty feet away.

I expect Crissy to throw a fit, but instead she laughs and claps her hands.

"Boat!" she shouts. "Daddy make a boat!"

The upside-down hat floats lazily downstream. I imagine it going all the way to the Wakarusa River, and from there to the ocean, where it will be eaten by a shark.

Dad grabs Crissy and carries her under his right arm as if she were a bag of grain. When he comes back up the bank with her, I can see his face, and I know it's time to go home.

On our way out to the field, we go by the gooseberry bushes that surround the walnut tree. Dad's sack of berries is gone, and so is mine.

After Mom and the girls leave and we've got the pipewick ready for more weed-wiping, Dad brings out his Remington twelve-gauge pump shotgun from the "off-limits-to-kids" closet in the upstairs hallway. We take it to the milo field with us.

I feel better now that we're away from the house again. During lunch, Crissy kept babbling about "pajama man" and boats, while Dad just stared at his plateful of casserole. He only ate a couple of bites.

All through the meal, Mom watched him with her face set in the expression that means she wants to talk to him but can't because kids are around. She didn't have a chance after lunch, either, because she had to take the girls to town again. All she had time to do was call out, "Be sure to phone the sheriff if those hunters come back," as she was driving the station wagon down the driveway.

Dad didn't answer her. He was already heading toward the east shop to put the patched tire back together.

Now, as we enter the field and begin wiping where we left off yesterday, Dad tells me to keep a lookout again. If I see anything move anywhere, I'm to shout and point.

So I watch, and it isn't long before I see something about a hundred yards away, just south of the bulge of trees where the creek curves.

This time I know it's no shadow, because a broad, conical hat rises above the milo.

"There!" I yell as loud as I can.

Dad stomps the clutch and takes the tractor out of gear, then stands to look where I'm pointing.

The hat rises a little more, and now I see the head and shoulders of the man wearing it. He's too far away for any features to be clear, but I have the impression that his face is leathery. His shirt is of loose black cloth.

"Do you see him?" I yell. "Do you see him?"

Dad reaches for the Remington, which is beside the toolbox, but my

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legs are in his way. By the time I move and he grabs the shotgun, it's too late. The only things visible between here and the bulge of trees are milo stalks, Johnsongrass weeds, and grasshoppers.

"Fucking bastards!" Dad yells, and his voice is so loud that the tractor engine seems quiet in comparison. I've never heard him use that one word before.

His face is flushed so that it's far redder than his usual sunburn, and veins stand out on his forehead and neck. His hands are clutching the shotgun as if he wants to break it in two.

I don't want him to have to feel the way he does. I hate the goddamn fucking trespasser who did this to him.

"You want me to run home and call the sheriff?" I ask. It's the only thing I can think of that might help.

Dad's hands relax a little, and he looks down at me. His face shows his rage, but I know it isn't directed at me.

"You stay right here," he says. "You're my lookout. Hold the gun, and if you see anything else, give it to me."

I know down inside — I *feel* it— that this is the most important thing I've ever had to do.

"You got it," I say, and he gives me the shotgun. It's even heavier than I remember from when he let me shoot it last fall.

I stand on the toolbox and hold the gun. Its stock rests beside my feet on the lid, and its barrel, taller than I am, points at the sky.

Dad puts the tractor in gear again, and we continue killing the weeds that are trying to ruin our crop.

After an hour we see three more of the men in strange hats and black clothes. Dad spots the first two; I spot the third. They can't be the same person, because they all pop up in different parts of the field within the span of a minute.

Dad fires the Remington at the third even though we're too far away. It seems to do some good, though, because we see no more of them this afternoon.

When we leave the field at seven o'clock, my head is still humming with the vibration of the blast.

As the Allis chugs up the road toward the house, Dad grins at me and pulls the bill of my Co-Op cap down over my eyes. I'm glad he feels better.

"O Lord my God," Patricia reads from the Book of Psalms, "in thee do I put my trust; save me from all them that persecute me, and deliver me . . ."

Patti's trying hard to do a good job, but tonight, again, Mom doesn't have her mind on the reading. Instead, she's staring at the picture window even though there's nothing to see but our reflections. Her fingers are twisting at the hem of her bath-

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robe as if she's trying to unravel it.

Jodi is sitting in a corner looking unhappy. She's holding Crissy, who is fidgeting and giggling, on her lap.

"Lest he tear my soul like a lion," Patricia continues, "rending it in pieces, while there is none to deliver."

Mom was in a weird mood this evening to begin with, but it got worse when Dad left the supper table without eating a thing.

"Are you sick, Loren?" she asked, and her tone made me want to sink down in my chair.

"Gotta fix the sprayer," Dad said, and went out. I didn't try to go with him, because I hadn't cleaned my plate yet.

Then, when I finally finished my potatoes, Mom told me to go upstairs and straighten my room. As I was going, I heard her tell Patricia and Jodi to do the dishes and look after Crissy.

My room didn't need straightening. I knew that the real reason Mom had given us those jobs was so she could be alone outside with Dad. After a few minutes of rearranging the stuff in my closet, I heard her yelling at him. I had to wait to feed the calves until she was back in the house.

I wish she wouldn't make things so hard.

"O Lord my God," Patricia reads, "if I have done this; if there be in —in —" She looks at Mom.

Mom just keeps staring at the dark window and twisting the hem of her robe.

I look over Patti's shoulder. "Iniquity," I tell her, pronouncing the word carefully.

Patti looks miserable. Mom told her to read all seventeen verses.

"If there by in-i-qui-ty in my hands," she continues, "if I have rewarded even unto him that was at peace with me; — yea, I have delivered him that without cause is mine enemy . . ."

There is a clang of metal striking metal outside, from the direction of the east shop, and my muscles jump. Patti's voice falters.

"Pajama man!" Crissy squeals.

"Shhhhhh," Jodi whispers.

Mom doesn't say anything, doesn't move.

"Let the enemy persecute my-soul, and take it," Patricia reads, "Yea, let him tread down my life upon the earth, and lay mine honor in the dust."

I think Mom must be the one who's sick. Take tonight's Bible reading — I mean, what does it have to do with anything? Usually she picks a passage about Jesus, or forgiveness, or being grateful, or something like that.

"He made a pit," Patricia reads, sounding confused, "and is fallen into the ditch which he made. . . . His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate."

Crissy giggles. I don't think she understands any of this. I don't think I do, either.

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The last verse, at least, is a little more like what I'm used to: "I will praise the Lord according to his righteousness, and will sing praise to the name of the Lord most high."

We all say, "Amen,"

"Very nice, Patricia," Mom says without looking at her, or at any of us. "You children run along to bed, now, and don't forget your prayers."

In my room I kneel and pray for God to make Mom feel better. As I finish, I hear the buzz-buzz-buzzing like I did last night, and I look out to see the white flashes.

I was in the east shop after lunch today, but whatever Dad's been welding was covered with a tarp. Maybe, instead of something for the farm, he's making a surprise, like when he made the swing set out of three inch pipe.

Maybe this time it's a present for Mom, a planter or something. That'd cheer her up, I'll bet.

"Pajama man!" I hear Crissy squeal down the hall.

I'll be glad when she's old enough to know what she's talking about. then she can let the rest of us in on it.

Wednesday. At breakfast the radio predicted rain for tonight, but the morning is clear and dry. We should be able to finish spraying the bean field today, provided everybody does what they're supposed to. I don't know about Mom, though; she might be too upset to pay attention to the work. I wish there had been some way for Dad to bring the shotgun along without her seeing it. She keeps looking back at it like it's a snake.

Well, like Dad says, we can't very well call the sheriff and ask for a deputy to guard our fields for us. It's our responsibility. So I'm going to keep as sharp an eye out as I can, while still blasting the goddamn weeds.

As we move down the rows of beans, the poison spraying from our wands like transparent fans, I can almost *see* the cockleburs dying. They're sneaky bastards, and they think they can get away with what they're doing by hugging the ground and hiding up against the stems of the bean plants, but we'll teach them better.

I hear Dad shout, and I turn my head to see where he's pointing.

A black-clad, cone-hatted illiterate fool has popped up about twenty rows away. He's so close that I see his rotten-toothed grin before he drops flat again.

Dad stops the Deere, and both Patricia and Jodi fall off their seats.

"Loren!" Mom shrieks. "Dear God, —"

Dad has brought the shotgun to his shoulder.

"Did you see where the fucker went, Phillie?" he yells.

"Straight down!"

Dad fires a blast at the spot where the fucker dropped, and a couple of soybean plants are shredded. Bits of torn leaves explode upward.

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"Loren, *stop it!*" Mom cries. "You're going to hit one of the children!"

But even as she yells, I see another fucker stand up, closer to the trees. This one is holding a rifle.

"Dad!" I scream, and point.

Dad turns and fires again, but the figure has already vanished.

Mom jumps off her bean-bar seat and runs back to the tractor. She grabs Crissy, who is laughing, and yells at the rest of us kids.

"Philip! Jodi! Patricia! Come quick, we're going home!" Her eyes look wild.

Jodi and Patti go to her, but they move slowly and shakily.

Dad lowers the Remington and squints off toward where the second fucker popped up. "It's all right, Kath. They're gone for now."

Mom grabs Jodi's arm with her free hand and glares up at Dad. "There was *nothing there*, Loren!"

Dad stares at her. "Are you blind? There were two of them, right over—"

"Patricia, Jodi!" Mom says sharply. "Did you see anyone?"

Jodi says "No," and Patricia shakes her head.

My face feels hot. "Then they're blind, too," I say, not caring that I'm sassing Mom.

Mom looks at me, and her expression is one I've never seen before. The only way I can describe it is as love and fear mixed together. I don't like it.

"Philip," she says, her voice quavering, "you're coming home with me this instant."

Dad lays down the shotgun beside the tractor seat. "We've still got beans to spray," he says.

"Philip," Mom says, ignoring Dad, "you get down from that bar and come home *now*."

I don't know what to do for a few seconds, but then I see how unhappy Dad looks. That makes up my mind.

"I can't, Mom," I say. "We've still beans to spray."

"Philip, you —" Mom begins, but Dad interrupts her.

"You heard the boy," he says.

Mom stands there for a moment, her face puffy and splotched with pink, and then she and the girls walk off across the field.

We watch them until they're on the road. Then Dad sits down on the tractor seat again.

"Women have no eyes," he says.

I raise my spray wand. "Can we do it with just one stream?"

Dad shrugs his shoulders. "We'll do the best we can. We can't do any more."

So we start up again, spraying one row at a time. We see the trespassers five more times, but they stay near the trees, out of shotgun range. Dad fires into the air a couple of times to scare them.

I can't tell whether it does or not.

We finish the field and go to the

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house for lunch at two o'clock. No one else is home, so we make bologna and cheese sandwiches. Fifteen minutes later, we're taking the Allis and pipewick to the milo, once again carrying the shotgun beside the toolbox.

This is the hottest afternoon we've had this week, but there's more wind, so our sweat evaporates fast and keeps us cool. We work for over four hours and don't see any trespassers, so we begin to think that we've finally run them off.

Then we hear two popping noises over the rumble of the tractor. Dad takes the Allis out of gear, idles down the engine, and looks back.

"God fucking damn," he says softly.

Two of the weed-wiper's three tires have burst.

We jump down to investigate, and Dad's Co-Op hat is blown off by a gust. It sails thirty or forty feet, so I run after it while Dad goes back to take a look at the flat tires.

I'm plunging through the milo, planning to yank up the stalk of Johnsongrass that's snagged Dad's hat, when a sharp pain burns up along the outside of my right ankle.

Simultaneously, I hear Dad yell, "Phillie! Stay still!"

But my shoe is caught, and I fall, smashing some milo. My ankle twists.

Dad's here instantly, picking me up.

"I should've known," he says. "Goddamn it, I should've known."

I look down and see a tight group of at least twenty barbed nails sticking up out of the ground. I've never seen nails quite like them before.

One of the outside nails has stabbed into the edge of my right shoe's sole. Dad borrows my pocketknife and cuts the side of the shoe so I can get my foot out.

A barb has opened a two-inch cut just in front of my heel. It's bleeding, but I can see that it's not bad. My ankle doesn't even hurt much from having twisted.

"Lucky grunt," Dad says.

He scrapes dirt away from the cluster of nails, and I see that they're set into a small piece of board, which in turn is set into a buried chunk of cement. If my foot had landed squarely on the nails so that the barbs had dug in, my momentum would have ripped the bottom of my foot off.

Dad carries me back to the Allis, examining the ground before each step. As we come closer to the tractor, I look behind the weed-wiper and see the glint of more nails.

Once we're finally there, Dad climbs up and sets me down on the toolbox. Still standing, he turns to face the trees along Coal Creek.

"All right, Charlie!" he cries. "You fucked with the wrong boy this time!"

Then he sits down, throttles up the Allis, and turns us toward the gate. As we pull out onto the road, I look back and see the weed-wiper

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wobbling behind us, limping on its flat tires.

Mom is sitting in the kitchen, obviously ready for some kind of showdown. But before she has a chance to say anything, she sees the blood on my shoeless right foot and hustles me into the bathroom, where she makes me sit on the edge of the tub. I hear the kitchen door open and close, which means that Dad's gone back outside.

Mom splashes alcohol onto the cut, and I have to grit my teeth so I don't cry. The sting goes all the way up into my chest.

When it subsides a little, I ask where the girls are. It's hard to keep my voice steady.

Mom begins to clean the wound with a cotton ball. "In town with your Aunt Sue," she says.

"Why?"

She throws the cotton ball into the can under the sink and uncaps a bottle of Mercurochrome. "Because."

"That's no answer, Mom," I say, not caring how it sounds.

She tries to give me her don't-back-talk-me look, but she can't hold it. Instead she looks at my ankle and dabs red stuff onto the cut.

"Your father needs help," she says.

The way she says it, like she feels sorry for him, makes me madder than I've ever been.

"I'm all the help he needs," I say. "You just haven't figured it out yet."

Now she looks at me like she feels sorry for *me*, too. "No, honey," she says. "*You* haven't figured it out yet. You're too little."

I stand up. "Are you finished?"

"Yes, honey. Does it sting much?"

"I don't feel a thing," I say, and it's not really a lie, because I'm so mad I can't think of anything else. I head for the bathroom door, planning to get my second-oldest pair of tennies and go back outside.

"You're to stay in your room tonight, Philip," Mom says. "I'll bring you a sandwich in a little bit."

I stop in the bathroom doorway. My impulse is to argue, but I know how much good that'll do. So instead I say, "Yes, ma'am," without looking back, and go on to my room.

Once there, I close the door and put on my tennies and camouflage jacket. Then I pull back the window curtains and peer between the cedar branches toward the east shop.

The Allis is parked just to the west of the building, its front-loader scoop lowered to the ground. The sun is low in the sky, beneath the clouds that are moving in from the south, and the tractor's orange paint glows with the same intensity as the sinking star. The Remington is still in its place beside the toolbox.

As I watch, Mom leaves the house and goes across the barnyard toward the shop. Before she gets there, Dad comes out, pushing a barrel that's sitting on a framework of two-inch

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angle-iron. The barrel is the same one he used the other night to check the leaky inner tube. It blocks my view of the bottom of the framework, so I can't see the wheels that must be there.

Mom is saying something, but even though my window's open, I can't make out her words. Dad ignores her and pushes the barrel over to the gasoline and diesel tanks, where he unhooks the gas tank's nozzle and begins pumping fuel. The barrel must be nearly full by the time he stops.

Then, with Mom still talking—maybe crying a little, too — Dad walks back into the shop and emerges again with a barrel lid and a hammer. Once he has the lid pounded down tight, he pushes the barrel-and-framework contraption into the front-loader scoop. Full of gas, the barrel must weigh hundreds of pounds, but Dad moves it like it was no big deal.

Mom screams now, and I hear every word: "For Christ's sake, Loren, *stop!*"

Dad wipes his hands on his jeans and climbs up to the tractor seat. He starts the engine, and the loader rises, lifting the barrel-and-framework off the ground.

Mom has her face in her hands. I feel embarrassed for her.

Dad puts the Allis into gear, and it rumbles out of the barnyard and down the driveway.

I wait until Mom has come back into the house, and then I take the screen off my window.

Creeping across the sloping kitchen roof is the hard part, because I have to be super quiet. But then I only have to jump a few inches to grab a cedar limb, and from there it's a piece of cake to climb down to the ground.

There's just enough daylight left for me to see the Allis down the road, turning into the bean field. I don't know what Dad's working on tonight, but I'm going to help.

I run down the driveway, bending low in case Mom happens to glance out a window.

By the time I've run across the bean field to where the silent Allis sits, the clouds have moved in and I can hardly see where I'm going. The trees of Coal Creek are a black mass in front of me. Night insects are whirring and clicking so loudly that I can't hear my own footsteps. I feel lightheaded and worn-out.

Dad isn't here.

The front-loader scoop is down, and empty. As I walk around it, I nearly trip over a shallow trough in the soft earth. Dad must have had to drag the barrel from here, so all I have to do is follow the track.

Once I get a few yards into the trees, though, I have trouble. It's so dark that I'm practically blind, and the ground is harder. I can't find any more dragmarks.

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But I've got my breath back, so I yell. I get no answer, but Dad has to be in here somewhere.

Something flaps away from the upper branches of the nearest tree, and it startles me. Then, as I'm gathering breath to shout again, I smell something horrible. The stench is just like the one at the low-water bridge two days ago, only stronger, closer.

It chokes me, and I have to let out my breath without yelling. I have the feeling deep in my throat that means I'm about to throw up.

A shrimpy twelve-year-old is little enough use without being sick, too.

So I clench my teeth and force the feeling away, then breathe in deep to try to yell again.

A callused hand clamps over my mouth, but I'm not scared, because I recognize the mingled smells of oil, herbicide, and soap.

"Quiet, goddamn it," Dad whispers, so softly that I can barely hear him. "Dead quiet, understand?"

I nod, and he takes his hand away from my mouth. I turn to face him, but all I can see is a dark man-shape. I can just make out something across his chest that must be the shotgun.

He squats so that his head is at the same height as mine. "Is your mother here?" he asks in the same superquiet voice.

I shake my head, but I'm not sure he can see it, so I whisper, "She'd be yelling for me if she were."

He's silent for a few moments—listening, I think — and then says, "I'll carry you." He turns, and I get on him piggyback.

Even though the insects become strangely quiet and the brush gets thicker the farther we go, I can hardly hear his footsteps. The sound of my own breathing is much louder.

We come out onto a cow path, and the stink of the dead thing is worse than ever.

My night vision has improved, but only a little. That's all right with me, because I don't really want to see whatever has died there.

We follow the path for several yards, then cut left and climb a slight rise. As we enter a clump of brush —probably gooseberry bushes — I hear the plop of a frog jumping into the creek.

There's a bare patch of ground at the center of the clump, and Dad stops here, squatting again so I can slide off his back. My tennies crunch dry sticks, and I shudder, afraid of making too much noise.

Dad puts his mouth close to my ear and whispers, "Sit down and be still." Then he's out of the bushes with hardly a rustle.

I do what he says, and I even hold my breath to be quieter. Then I hear a drumlike sound, and I know that Dad has taken the lid off the barrel. A few seconds later, he's back, and I start breathing again.

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He lays the shotgun on the ground, then squats in front of me so close that I can see his eyes despite the darkness. He whispers even more softly than before.

"Keep your fingers on this," he says, and guides my left hand behind me to what feels like a strand of monofilament fishing string about three inches off the ground. It's been here all along, tied to the base of one of the bushes, and I didn't even know it.

"What's it for?" I whisper.

Dad starts to chuckle, then stops. "To give ol' Charlie a surprise, When you feel it go tight and then slack, like a one-two punch, you slap me on the arm. All right?"

"You got it," I whisper.

He takes the handkerchief from his back pocket, then reaches under a bush and pulls out what looks like a ketchup bottle. When he unscrews the cap, the smell of gasoline overpowers the dead-animal stink.

He stuffs the handkerchief into the bottle neck.

"What's that for?" I ask.

He grasps my neck with his free hand and squeezes, not quite hard enough to hurt. "Hush. Supply fucked up, so we don't have the mix or igniter. We're improvising." He lets go of my neck, reaches into his shirt pocket, and brings out his butane lighter. "If the trip wire screws up, I'll slap *you*, and you yank the line. But if one of ours comes through, I'll tell you to cut it. Have your knife ready."

I start to say, "You got it," but make myself stay quiet insted. I don't want to fuck up.

Still squatting, Dad turns to face the cow path. He holds the bottle in his right hand, the lighter in his left. The Remington is beside him on the ground.

I get onto my knees as quietly as I can. The fingertips of my left hand are touching the monofilament line, and my right hand reaches into my back pocket for my knife.

One-handed, I open the biggest blade. Then Dad and I wait.

Chiggers are eating me alive, and I'm afraid of copperheads, but I don't move. I don't even flinch.

I won't let Dad down.

When it happens, I've been here so long that I think I must be asleep and dreaming. I hear soft, weird chattering down on the cow path, and then the fishing line jerks taut against my fingers.

Almost immediately, it goes slack and drops. I hear a loud clang and a whooshing sound. My left hand reaches up to slap Dad on the arm, but hits his leg.

He's standing, and the handkerchief in the bottle blazes with fire. It lights his face and gleams in his eyes.

Then he throws, and the flame tumbles over the bushes and down to the path.

As it flies, I think I hear Mom calling me from far away.

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A brilliant yellow-and-orange wall leaps up from the path, and my eyes close from the sudden pain of the light. The insides of my eyelids are red, red, red, with dancing bluish purple flames tumbling across them.

A tremendous roar follows, washing over the distant sound of Mom's voice. I feel as if I've been thrust into the nozzle of an acetylene torch.

"Wienie roast!" Dad shouts. "Gonna have a wieeeeeee-nieeeeee roast!"

I open my eyes and see him leap out through the burning bushes like a ghost. He holds the Remington thrust out in front of him, and he's pumping and firing, pumping and firing, pumping and firing. The blasts are tiny pops punctuating the roar of the world.

The air is full of jumping light.

I look down. My pocketknife has snapped closed over the soft skin between my thumb and forefinger. Blood oozes out over the mother-of-pearl.

Now that I see it, I feel the pain, and it brings me to my feet. The heat of the fire beats at my face, and I start to run through the bushes.

Before I'm free of them, I drop my knife. I stop and get down on my hands and knees to search for it.

"Cook 'em up *hot!*" Dad yells. "Throw 'em in yellow, take 'em out *red!*"

I've lost my knife.

Wanting to cry, I stand and stumble through the crisping weeds. I have to get to Dad.

I find him on the cow path, flaming trees all around. He's reloading.

The fifty-five-gallon barrel is lying on its side not far away, still held at the bottom end by the framework Dad made. The barrel is on fire, the rusty old gray paint hissing and crackling.

I run to Dad, who is raising the Remington to his shoulder again, aiming down the path toward the bean field.

Twenty yards from us, a burning figure is running away. Another comes from the trees to join it, and then another, and another, and they meld together into a single mass of fire.

Dad shoots.

The mass flares, and is gone.

Dad fires the shotgun four more times, then lowers it. His face is dotted with beads of sweat, and they reflect the hundred fires a thousand times. He turns to look down at me, and grins.

His left arm is on fire.

I grab his right wrist. He drops the Remington, but no matter how hard I pull, he just stands and smiles at me.

I feel heat on my legs, and look down to see that my jeans are burning.

Before I can think of what to do, the air is rushing past so quickly that I almost feel cool. And then I'm in Coal Creek, in the mud, and Dad is rolling me onto my side. My face goes under, and I come up coughing.

"You're gonna be O.K., Phillieboy!" Dad shouts.

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As I come to a sitting position and look up again, I see that his entire shirt is on fire.

I grab him around his legs, trying to pull him down, but I'm too small. I'm too goddamn fucking small.

Dad looks proud and happy.

Thursday. Mom won't leave the hospital, so Aunt Sue volunteers to take care of us kids. That's fine, but I refuse to stay at her house.

She tries to soothe, then argue, and then force me, but I don't listen. Every time she leaves me alone for a moment, I go out the front door and begin walking the twenty-seven miles home. My legs sting, but I don't care.

Eventually, Aunt Sue gives up and takes us where we belong. On the way, she stops at the hospital to tell Mom, who is in a waiting room I can go into.

Mom nods to us, but doesn't say anything.

She wasn't burned, even though she ran into the center of the fire to find us, but she's still in shock. I'm not mad at her anymore, because she was the one who finally pulled Dad into the water, whether she knew what she was doing or not.

"We men," Dad said to me as Mom and I helped him into the front-loader scoop, "we ***know*** what to do."

It was then, just as I began to feel everything would be all right, that Mom started crying. I had to push her to make her get into the scoop with him.

Then I drove us home and called the ambulance.

Home. Aunt Sue is bustling about with lunch like a mother hen. *She's the take-charge sort, or thinks she is,* but with Dad in the hospital, I'm the man of the family. He said so, and nobody can change it.

After lunch I put on my camouflage jacket and Co-Op hat and go outside.

I fill the Allis's fuel tank, then back the tractor into the east shop and hitch up the chisel-plow. It takes a long time, because I can't manhandle the hitch like Dad can, but I finally manage. While I'm connecting the hydraulic hoses, Aunt Sue comes out and asks me what I think I'm doing.

I tell her what I ***know*** I'm doing, and if she doesn't like it, she can go back to Topeka.

Patti, Jodi, and Crissy are standing in the barnyard as I'm driving out. *They look sad, so I smile and wave.* I keep telling them that Dad's going to be O.K. and that I'll take care of them until he is, but they're still scared and worried.

When I get to the bean field, which is damp from the rain that came too late, I drive the tractor to the far edge and put it into neutral. Then I dismount and walk into the midst of the blackened trees.

It's a lot brighter in here now than it was with all those leaves and bushes,

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so I don't have much trouble finding my knife. It's dirty and a little warped, but it's still a damn good knife.

On the way back out, I pat the barrel to hear the booming sound, and my hand comes away smeared with orange-brown and black. All I need is some green to make camouflage paint.

Once I'm in the field again, I don't waste any time. I climb up onto the Allis, lower the chisels, and get to work.

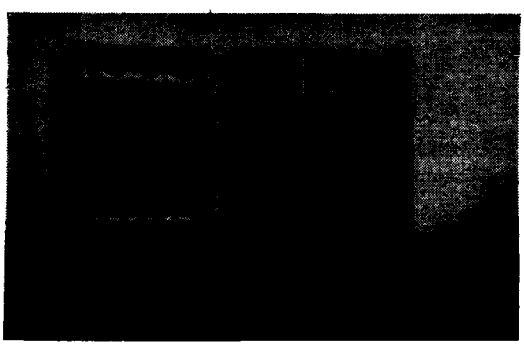
After ten minutes, I see something ahead on the ground and stop the tractor to investigate.

I climb down and stare at the thing for a long time. Despite the smell, I don't feel sick. I kick what's left of the hat, and it crumbles.

Then I take out my knife, bend down, and cut a long strip of scorched black cloth.

As I return to the Allis, I tie the cloth around my Co-Op cap so that the loose ends will blow out behind me. If Charlie comes back, he'll see it, and he'll know what it means.

I settle into my seat, crank up the throttle, and plow the rest under with the burned crop.



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Jane Yolen's latest is the delightful tale of the clash between the Abbot of Kilkenny and a Christianized elf known as Uncle Finn.

The Uncorking of Uncle Finn

BY
JANE YOLEN

Uncle Finn had angered the Abbot. It had something to do with blasphemy — the Abbot's, not Uncle Finn's. Uncle had been converted several centuries before by the Irish saint Patrick and was deeply religious still, given to falling on his knees in the unlikeliest of places: rookeries, backstairs, tidal pools, butter churns. The Abbot, on the other hand, was a pagan and a drunk besides. It was inevitable that the two should clash over matters of faith.

Now I grant you that it is unnerving for the locals to have a fanatically Christianized elf forever exhorting them to eschew evil and seek the good, popping up unexpectedly in their most secret places of vice. He knew where every still was working, every mistress kept, every bit of falsified paper stored. He had a nose for venialness. But as he had been proselytizing for more than three centuries in his own curious way, one would have thought the humans would have grown used to it. And indeed, those who could stand it the least had long since left, moving to Killarney or Glocamorra or catching a ride with itinerant saints, sailing westward over the treacherous seas in coracles made of glass. There were some just that desperate to escape Uncle Finn's exhortations.

The Abbot, however, was newly appointed, being a sinner of great reknown on the Continent. It was thought by the bishop that a year or two in Kilkenny under the watchful eye of Uncle Finn would wear him down. It was the bishop's own version of a finishing school, and he was prepared to finish the Abbot or kill him in the process.

The war had begun as soon as the

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Abbot had set foot in the cellar, that being Uncle Finn's province. He was partial to dark places; his maternal great-grandmother had once lived with a troll, and Finn took after that side.

The Abbot's first trip to the cellar was without warning. He had disconnected the bell that rang over the cellarer's head, a precaution even his most fervid detractors had applauded. That way, of course, no one could count the number of times he visited belowstairs. Kilkenny Abbey was well known not only for its wines and a surprisingly good claret, but also for its hardier brews: kümmel made with an imported caraway seed, a plum drink concocted with the help of a recipe lent by the Slovakian saint Slivos, and a wild blackthorn gin that had been said to rock even the toughest of European soldiery.

To say that Uncle Finn was surprised by the Abbot is an understatement. He was astonished out of three Hail Marys. They bled from his lips and lost him the conversion of three recalcitrant mice and a reprobate rat.

One must also imagine the Abbot's astonishment, for no one had warned him about Uncle Finn. He had come tripping down the stairs, ready for further lubrication, and suddenly there was this wee attenuated creature garbed in green on knobby knees before a congregation of reluctant rodents. Is it any wonder the Abbot cried out and held his head? Or that Uncle Finn reciprocated with the bloody Hail Marys and an elvish curse that shattered three bottles of the best claret that the Abbot had hoped to save for after midnight Mass?

The Abbot fired the second shot of the war, a letter to the pope requesting excommunication for all faerie folk on the grounds that everyone knew they had no souls. But the pope refused the request, for he himself had once held similar views when he was but a seminarian. And then he had pronounced that his walking stick would sooner grow blossoms than a certain nixie of the local pond might enter heaven. He had not known she was a convert, one of the magdalens brought round by a recent crusade. No sooner had the words been out of his mouth, than his staff had sprouted a feathering of ferns and spatulate leaves and begun to bud. So the pope was not about to deny the possibility of souls to any of the Good Folk. In effect, he left the matter entirely in the bishop's hands.

This so displeased the Abbot, he turned his displeasure into a monumental drunk using the sacramental wine, a drunk that ended only when he awoke in his cell the Sunday before Lent to see Uncle Finn perched on his bedfoot, hands upraised, the spirit of the Lord and all the Irish saints moving in his mouth.

"Arise," cried Uncle Finn, "and go forth."

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The Abbot arose, and his sandal went forth and smacked Uncle Finn right between the eyes while all the while the Abbot praised the Lord.

Now a sandal and Uncle Finn are about the same size, so there was more damage than either the Abbot or the Good Lord intended. So the Abbot was, indeed, forced to arise and scoop up Uncle Finn's body from the stone floor. He brought Uncle Finn, wrapped in a linen handkerchief, to the infirmarer, a certain Brother Elias.

"What can you do with this thing?" asked the Abbot. However, as he was holding Uncle Finn wrapped in the handkerchief in his left hand and his right right was holding his own head (and it still ringing from the three days of steady drinking), it was no wonder Brother Elias's answer was confusing.

"If you'd stop bending your elbow, my lord Abbot," said the old monk, "your head would be marvelously improved. It's a wonder of anatomy, it is, that head and elbow are so connected." The infirmarer, being a reformed tippler himself, had plenty more salvos where that one came from. He had given up drink and taken up religion with the same fervor.

"Not my elbow and not my head, you Kilkenny clodpate! This!" The Abbot held out his left hand, where, in the linen, Uncle Finn was just coming to.

"Saints in heaven, but it's Finn," cried Elias, making the sign of the cross hastily and missing a fourth of it.

"That's not fine at all," said the Abbot, who had no tolerance for any accents save his own.

"Not fine, Finn," explained the infirmarer, but since he pronounced them the same, it led to a few more moments of misunderstanding until he reached over and gently removed Uncle Finn from his winding sheet. "You had better be asking his pardon, my lord. He's a Christian now for sure, which means he will turn the other cheek as often as not. But he's still quite a hand at elvish curses when he's riled. Better not to be on his bad side."

"He's already on *my* bad side." roared the Abbot, remembering with renewed fury the three bottles of claret. "Fix him up, tidy him up, and shut him up. Then report to me. The minute he can handle a good strong talking-to, I want to know."

But Finn was already beginning to sit up, and reaching his wee hands up to his wee head. What was not clear to the two monks was that Finn, while awake, was not aware. The sandal had quite addled him. His magic was turned around and about widdershins. He began to moan and speak in tongues.

"Oh, for Our Lord's sake," cried the Abbot with great feeling, his own head twanging like a tuning fork by the tone of those tongues.

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The supplication to Our Lord brought Uncle Finn's eyes wide open, and he began to sing hosannas.

"I wish he'd put a cork in it!" cried the Abbot, his hands to his ears.

At the word *wish*, Finn's eyes got a strange glow in them, and everything not human in the room began to stir about as if caught up in a twisting wind. Faster and faster anything not pinned down began to move: glasses and retorts; bunches of drying patience, pepperwort, and clary; mortars and pestles; long lines of linen bandages; copies of *Popular Errors in Physick*, Mithradates' receipt for *Venice Treacle*, and Drayton's *Hermit*. All the while, Uncle Finn kept chanting:

Pickles and peas, knife and fork,
Find a bottle, carve a cork,
Wind it up and in the wine
A sailor's life is mighty fine.

Which, of course, is a terribly mixed-up version of the old bottle spell used mostly by drunken mages to call up spirits.

Sea winds began to blow, spouts of whales were sighted, dolphin clicks heard, and with one last incredible *whoooosh*, the whole of the whirling stuff was sucked in through the neck of a nearby bottle of Bordeaux '79 that Elias used for medicinal purposes only, it being too sour and full of sediment for a tippler of taste. The displaced wine splattered all over the infirmary, and the room smelled like a pothouse for a week.

Then, with a final *thwap*, the cork replaced itself. The stirring continued inside the bottle for fully a minute more, and when the wind and mist and moisture had resolved itself, there appeared inside the light green bottle a passable imitation of a sailing ship, with a pestle for a mainmast and linen bandages for sails. Clinging to the mortar steering wheel was Uncle Finn, looking both puzzled and pleased. He gave a weak smile in the direction of the cork, put his hand on his head, and slid down in a faint onto the papier-mâché deck on which the ingredients for *Venice Treacle* could still be discerned.

"Oh, my Lord," said the infirmarer, not really sure if he meant the salutation to have a capital *L* or a small one.

But the Abbot, taking it was himself addressed, said softly, "And *that* should do it."

For a week he was right, for the abbey was quiet and filled with plainsong laced only with the Abbot's own version of an old capstan chantey sung fully a half note off-tune.

But the communications of the Fey, while sometimes slow, are sure. The rodent proselytes told their families, one of whose members was overheard by a wandering and early June bug. The June bug's connections included a will-o'-the-wisp who had married into Uncle Finn's family. It was scarcely a week later that word

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of Uncle Finn's incarceration came to my father's ears.

By the time he had sorted through his meager store of magicks and translated himself to the far side of the island, using a map in one of his books that was sadly too many years ahead of its time, twelve boggles, banshees, nuggles, and a ghost (all relatives) had been to visit before him. The abbey had, in that short week's time, gotten itself a reputation for being haunted — as indeed it was, in a manner of speaking — and the humans had summarily deserted the abbey grounds until the proper exorcists might be found.

None of this, of course, helped poor Uncle Finn. No one but a human could pull the cork from the Bordeaux bottle, for it had been placed there by a human wish. And as long as the visits continued, no human would venture near the place.

My father sighed and stared at his brother, whom he remembered fondly as an elf of high promise and a great sense of humor. Uncle Finn looked little like the memory, being sadly faded and a bit green, a property not only of the tinted glass but of his initial handling, seasickness, and a week corked up in a bottle that still reeked of wine.

Father shouted at him and Finn shouted back, but their voices were strained through the layers of green glass. Conversation was impossible. At last Father came home, whey-faced and desperate-looking. In fact, all the relatives had left, for there was nothing any of them could do except sigh. As the last of them departed, the priestly exorcists arrived. Humans have this marvelous ability to time their exits and entrances, which is why they — and not the Fey — hold theatrical events. They spoke their magic words and threw about a great deal of incense and believed it was their own efforts that rid the abbey of the Fey. But like a plumber who gets paid after a sink has fixed itself, they were praised for nothing. Visiting Fey never overstay their welcome nor hang about when nothing can be done. It is simply not in our nature.

The Abbot had, of course, sworn Elias to secrecy concerning Uncle Finn and the bottle, and the two of them had replaced the Bordeaux '79 on the wine cellar racks without the cellarer's knowledge. But Elias, after a week in a room smelling strongly of tipple, returned to his old ways, and after that his vow of secrecy mattered little, for no one would have believed a word he had to say. As for the Abbot, after a year of the most flagrant misrule, he was sent by the pope on a crusade against the infidels from which he did not return, though there were frequent rumors that he had become a sheikh in a distant emirate and had banned all peris and jinn from his borders.

That left Uncle Finn corked up in his bottle on a back shelf in a cellar of

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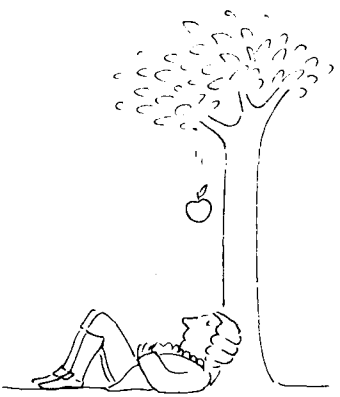
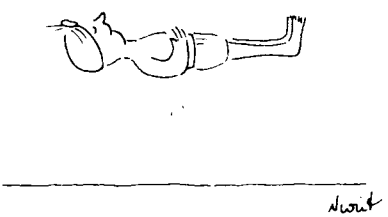
a once-haunted Abbey, marked as a wine so degraded and unpopular that it would never be taken by any knowledgeable person from the shelf. And we were afraid he would remain so forever.

But one day, as I sat reading in my father's library, which is well stocked with books of the past, present, and future, I came upon a volume in section A. A for Archaeology, Astronomy, Ancestry, and Aphorisms. It was a splended piece of serendipity, for the book told about the Americas, where, in some distant year, a man rich in coins but lacking in wisdom would take Kilkenny Abbey stone by stone over the great waters, a feat even a Merlin might envy. And — as one of the Aphorists wrote in another volume in that section, since Americans would have no wine before its time, surely the magical words "Bordeaux '79" will reek of such time. Uncle Finn, oh Uncle Finn, you will have before you an entire continent to convert, and proselytes beyond counting, for a land that saves its saviors in plaster and seeds the heavens with saucers should have no trouble at all accepting a bottle saint.



PHYSICS



METAPHYSICS

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A reporter, on assignment in Hawaii, learns something about the gods of the ancient Islands, and about the nature of love . . .

On the Dream Coast in Winter

BY
RICHARD MUELLER

We broke from the cloud wall and ran straight for Ke-Ahole Airport, a curtain of boiling water following us in as darkness closed on the big island. December, galloping storm season on the Kona Coast. The first gusts were shaking the little island hopper before we rolled to a stop, and I watched a shock wave of water sweep across the tarmac. It was beautiful and, in the way of all natural violence, oddly soothing.

"Mr. McNary?"

There were only eight passengers on the flight, and the stewardess had taken care to memorize our names. I was the only single male. She was attractive, in a Germanic way, scrubbed and wholesome, but I was too distracted to follow through and merely nodded.

"If you'd like to wait out this shower, it should let up soon."

"Oh no." I glanced out at the lights of the terminal, melting in the rain. "I think I'll probably run for it."

"If you're sure . . ."

She sounded disappointed, but I smiled and shook my head. Bad timing and mixed symbols, the bane of my life.

She led me to the doorway. With the exception of one elderly lady, who had gathered up her bundles, hopped out, and disappeared into the rain, the other passengers were sticking solidly to their seats. This was not the weather they had come to see. They looked at me as if I were crazy.

"Are you staying long?" the girl asked. Her name badge read NANCY, an improbably white Christian name for the Central Pacific, but her sun-darkened blonde complexion looked far more at home than mine.

"A week or two," I replied, and let

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it fall. I just didn't have the energy for a tryst. She smiled.

"Well then, perhaps we'll see each other."

"Perhaps so. Thanks for your help."

"Watch your step."

I did, hit the runway, and ran. I was soaked in ten feet.

Ann had wanted space, and I knew better than to argue with her. There was something strangely easy about agreeing. I loved her and, as long as we'd been together, I'd had no serious doubts that she'd loved me, but we seemed to function best with distance. Usually there was plenty. At least four times a year, assignments took me off for a week or a month, and Ann herself had just spent two months in London, plugging her last novel and researching the next. After three weeks of being together, she'd broken it to me.

"You have a job you can go on?"

I set down my coffee. "Why? You tired of me already?"

She put her arms around me and kissed me, a bit too gently, I thought. "I love you, but I can't live with you. Not all the time."

"I know."

"And I have a novel to finish. You understand." I did. Get lost for a while, lower the tension, or that's it. Live with someone else. I nodded, did my best to smile, and found it easy. I loved her, and you do what you have to.

A few phone calls found me an assignment in Hawaii covering winter sportfishing. Ann was almost envious. Want to come along? No. I'll see you in a few weeks. When do you go? Tomorrow. Then, let's make the best of it. Now. Right now.

The rental desk turned up a three-year-old Toyota with an acceptable contract. Not that I was paying. *Sportfishing International* had arranged a beach house about a mile beyond the charter marina at Kailua, nothing fancy but decent. I dropped off my gear, stopping only to change into dry clothes, and started back toward town. The roads were slime gullies pitted with sand-bottomed puddles. The first assault had blown itself out, but rain was breaking now in patches, drifting clouds of windblown water that blotted out everything. During one of these attacks, I skidded to the verge of a carefully manicured lawn and waited while the car rattled and rocked. When the rain ceased a moment later, as suddenly as it had begun, and the windshield cleared, I saw her. The lady from the airport.

Not the girl, Nancy, but the old lady who had hopped down and fled before the rain. She was trudging up the road from the marina, laden with bundles and luggage, coming toward me on the opposite side of the road. She had obviously been through several of these torrents but seemed strangely unaffected. Water was her

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elemental nature, and she moved among, not against it. A creature of the Kona. I could tell neither her age nor race through the streaked window, so, on impulse, I rolled it down and leaned out.

"Ma'am, can I give you a ride?" I was going the other way, and Hawaiian bag ladies had nothing to do with sportfishing. On the other hand she'd probably been here since Captain Cook had died. She might provide invaluable background. She peered at me through wire spectacles untouched by the rain and pointed toward the marina. I shook my head.

"I've got time. I can give you a ride."

She bobbled spryly across the muck and thrust her head down to my level. An ancient face, colliding bloods swirling in wrinkles, but clear blue eyes. Deep eyes, very deep.

"Hop in."

"Thank you."

It turned out that she was headed several miles beyond where I was staying, but she didn't ask and I didn't mention it. We slithered around curves, throwing rooster tails of yellow water, and I encouraged her to tell me about the scenery. She was an able guide.

It seemed that no structure, tree, rock, or stream was beyond her knowledge, though at first I thought she might be making it up. But I had developed a good reporter's instinct for recognizing the truth when I heard it and decided that she, at least, believed in what she was saying. Many of the referents were of the more lurid sort — murders, infidelities, various rites of passage and celebrations of lost innocence — and I was almost disappointed when she indicated the house where I was staying and remarked that it was once home to a Portuguese baker. So much for fame on the grand scale.

But in a fair percentage of cases, her comments were obscure or incomprehensible; and I strained against the attention of the road to understand. Hawaiian words were mixed in with English that was archaic or strangely placed, and it was only extended concentration at the expense of the travelogue that led me to realize what she was referring to. Ancient Hawaii. Pagan Hawaii, of the time before Cook, when the people of these islands were of purer blood. The blood of navigators and fishermen. The Hawaii of Lono and Pele, of the Law of the Splintered Oar, and the City of Refuge. The woman was a wealth of incunabula.

This was not my first trip to Hawaii. Two years ago I had done a story on modern Molokai for one of the tabloids and, knowing that I had time to prepare and wanting to keep out of Ann's way, I'd overread on the subject. Five books in six days. Most of the information had been superfluous, but now, under the woman's

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commentary, it was registering as confirmation.

She gave her name as DonnaBess and immediately asked me for mine. "McNary," she said, rolling it around in her mouth. "Scottish. Yes. Many Scottish, Scots have made their marks here." She proceeded to give me a detailed genealogy of what must have been every Scottish family on the islands. The woman was incredible. If the essence, culture, and history of Hawaii could have been distilled into an organic memory bank, a living computer, it would have been DonnaBess. I had once read a Robert Heinlein novel about a giant computer that possessed the sum of human knowledge and thought nothing of discoursing for hours on any subject. DonnaBess seemed to be such a database.

"Watch it here," she said softly, and I slammed on the brakes as the road ran out above the sea, a sandy semi-circle ending in a drop to the waves below. The clouds had broken into curling traces of white, and bands of sunlight fell in random patterns on the land and sea. It was breathtaking.

"Is this what you wanted? Here."

"Oh yes. Thank you. This is fine."

DonnaBess hopped out and paused to smile before turning away. One, two, three steps and she disappeared soundlessly over the cliff edge.

I ran to the verge, expecting to see her body, or a trail leading down to the sea, the woman bouncing along under the weight of her bundles, but there was nothing. The sandy cliff dropped vertically perhaps five feet, ending in a fifty-degree slope, disappearing into a tangle of low trees, underbrush, and ice plant. There seemed to be no way in, but perhaps DonnaBess knew better. And once in, she would have been invisible to anyone above. I contempleted climbing down, then settled for scanning the bush from where I stood, but in the fifty yards from the drop-off to the pounding Pacific, there was not sufficient movement to give away the presence of a human being. I watched for about five minutes before the rain drove me out.

There was enough of the day remaining for me to get back to the marina and check in. I was supposed to meet a man named Zarco who would arrange for my sea time. A Portuguese (I remembered the baker), Zarco assured me that tomorrow it would be clearing and calmer. His boat, the *Slamjack*, was mine for three days, and I knew that *Sportfishing International* would depend on me to make the most of it. The Kona cruisers usually went for anything up to five hundred dollars a day, and I would have to pay back my investment if I wanted to remain persona grata in the free-lance pool. Zarco showed me around the *Slamjack*, handed me a box of antimotion implants, and suggested that we get a drink. Over

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bottles of San Miguel, I pumped him for background filler I could use. Of sportfishing he knew plenty.

"But I can't much help you with local color, Dave," he said, signaling the muscled Japanese bartender for another round. "I've only been out here on the Big Island two years, and it doesn't interest me much, know what I mean? Honolulu is where the action's at, but work's better here. Every two weeks or so, I hop over to 'lulu and blow it out."

"Sounds fun."

"Yeah, but local color, I dunno . . ."

"I did find a pretty good source," I said, and proceeded to tell him about DonnaBess and her disappearance. He shook his head.

"I never seen her, Dave. Let me ask Nakadai."

But the bartender did not know her either.

Television reception was stormed out, so I read until eight, when the fatigue rolled over me. Got to make an early start, I told myself, turned down the bed, and reached for the light. The doorbell rang. I knew precisely three people on the island of Hawaii. This was not one of them.

The light was bad, and for a startled second I thought it was Ann, but that was impossible. She was short and attractive, with dark hair that parted in the center and fell in waves over her shoulders. She wore a green plaid shirt, blue jeans, and sandals. Conscious of my body's reaction to the situation, I pulled my robe tighter around me. I am easily surprised.

"I didn't mean to waken you," she said, "but I saw a light. Can I use your phone? My car's stuck."

"Yes, sure. My pleasure." I stepped back to let her by as a drumroll of thunder echoed through the dark. Zarco had said clear tomorrow, but the wind followed, and then the rain. I could hear her talking on the kitchen phone. It was obvious to me that she couldn't go back out in that. She hadn't even had a jacket. I wandered back to my bedroom to dress.

"I couldn't get a garage or cab. Not until tomorrow."

Her name was Nova Pelley, and she had come to the Big Island to vacation and write a mystery novel. The parallels were unsettling. I made an effort to put Ann out of my thoughts. Surprisingly, she went, but when the time came to make an advance, I couldn't do it. There were too many confusions in the way. I tucked her onto my couch and, grumbling to myself, slipped off to bed.

Lying in the dark, thinking about the lovely young woman on my couch, about my loving distant Ann back in L.A., I couldn't shake the impression that while I might someday die of love, I would never succeed at it. Just before sleep came, there was the

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ghostly feeling of a smile, fading, but their faces were too similar for me to tell whose.

I awoke to the sound of my door opening and saw her, naked, silhouetted in the opening. The door closed. I held my breath as I felt her slip into the bed.

"Nova?"

"Shhh. I couldn't sleep. It's all right?"

"Yes."

"Hold me."

The telephone woke me to overcast light and an empty bed. I fumbled the receiver to my ear. It was Zarco.

"Dave, you still wanna go out today?"

I glanced out the window, down the sand to the churning water. It had cleared, somewhat, but the sea was still running high.

"Can we? It looks rough."

"No problem. You use the patch?"

The motion-sickness implant. I'd forgotten, but said, "Yeah," as I worked one from its wrapper and taped it in place behind my ear. "Got it."

"Then hustle down. We leave in half an hour."

I pulled on the clothes I'd set aside and grabbed my Sony. As I drove out toward Kailua, I looked for Nova's car, but it was gone, a fact that raised a deep, irrational annoyance in me. I had wanted to see her again, if only to reassure myself that it had been real. The lovemaking had been too complete, as if we'd been lovers for years, as if every other woman were merely an apprentice. She'd touched every perfect chord, yet had somehow managed to get out of bed and out of the house without waking me, a feat I would have believed impossible. The unreality of the night galled me, and sudden guilty thoughts of Ann back in L.A. crashed down and darkened the morning. I felt adrift.

But somehow, even with the late start on the implant, the day went well. Zarco shot the *Slamjack* out between the Kailua buoys into the open ocean, set me up in the trolling chair, and lashed down the wheel. Then, with plenty of beer at hand and the tape recorder running, he started to teach me sportfishing.

Like DonnaBess, Zarco knew his subject. He rambled on about depths, speeds, swells; on the weights, habits, and reactions of fighting fish; of captains and boats, their idiosyncrasies and histories; of points, bays, currents, reefs; on sun, wind, climate, storms, fires at sea, heroism, and cowardice; on the behavior of sportsmen and the madness of the professionals, to dedicate their lives to a mistress as treacherous as the sea. I let the Sony suck it all up. Later I would transcribe and organize, knocking it into column inches and captions to fit the pictures that Titlebaum, *S.I.*'s house photographer, had taken during the previous month. It would mean a

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week of rewrite in San Francisco, another week away from Ann. Well, the hell with that. It's what she wants. I put her out of my mind. The job came first.

By one-thirty I was on my third tape. I'd had two false strikes on the line, not that either of us cared. I was here to write, not fish. And, unlike most of the captains, Zarco had no interest in the bloody competition to bring in the biggest kills.

"*Slamjack* has had her share of big marlins, Dave," he said. "I don't need to soak my well deck in blood every day. I don't need to prove anything. There're plenty of fish on the Kona for everyone."

We were cruising the edge of a thick fogbank about four miles off the beach. "Damned thing," Zarco grumbled, draining a beer. "It's been there all week. Don't usually get wind and fog together, but on the Kona anything can happen. You ever see one like that?"

I had. I'd covered the Falklands War and sailed through combinations of forty-knot winds and no visibility, wondering how people could be so stupid as to fight over a place where the weather was insane. But nothing guaranteed sense in human affairs. Why should I expect nature to do us better?

"Anything in that?"

Zarco shrugged. "Maybe. Most fisherman wouldn't. Too gloomy. Too easy to clip another boat." He looked over at the wall of boiling cloud and rubbed his jaw. "Maybe I better check the radar."

I used the pause to change tapes. The front was still sending out squadrons of clouds and a broken overcast layer shot with sunbeams. A storm was again playing over Ke-Ahole's unlucky airport.

"Dave, come up here. Look at this."

I locked down the rod and made my way to the steering flat. Zarco was hunched over the hood of the radar set and moved aside as I came up.

It was the largest blip I'd ever seen, like a huge glowing plank on the water, flanked by two smaller strokes.

"What dya make of that?"

"Aircraft carrier? And two escorts?"

"Out here?" Zarco shook his head. "I seen a lot of bird farms going in an' out of Pearl. They're not that big."

I didn't know the scale and said so. Zarco looked nervously into the fog. "It's gotta be a false echo," he said softly, " 'cause if it's an aircraft carrier, it's over three thousand feet long."

"UFO?" I asked, smiling against the chill I felt, but Zarco didn't find that funny. He unlashed the wheel.

"Pull in your line," he said. "We're going home."

I didn't argue. I would need Calvo Zarco's cooperation and goodwill. But

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I had every intention of asking around to see if any of the other boats had picked up the strange blip. I headed for the marina club. She was waiting in the bar.

I notice clothing. I don't know about men, but to me it says plenty about a woman. She was wearing a striped shirt and tight bluejean shorts with brass buttons on the fly. I couldn't have designed it better. She waved me over.

"Sleep well?" she asked innocently. The bar was almost deserted, but I kept my voice low.

"Very well, but I didn't hear you go out."

"I didn't mean for you to," she said, slipping a hand over mine. I thought of those brass buttons and was grateful that she couldn't see my erection through the table.

"What are you doing for dinner?"

She smiled. "No plans. There's a great seafood bar in Ke-Ahole. We could watch it rain on the airport."

We split a plate of crabs and a pot of fish chowder. I made small talk about my work and managed to pry loose a few of her vital stitistics. She was thirty, from Virginia, on vacation from a museum job in San Diego. Like almost everyone else I knew, she had aspirations of being a writer; the urge to leave a mark that seems to be the trademark of a rootless people. We didn't discuss the previous night. I guess I was hoping for her to return and didn't want to say the wrong thing. Apparently I didn't. As we were leaving, she took my hand and said, "Will you bring me back to my car in the morning?"

"Yes."

"Then wait for me here. My motel's just across the road. I want to pick up a few things." She kissed me lightly and left. I leaned back against the car, watching the sky. This was more than good fortune. I thought of the distance between L.A. and San Diego, of Ann, and the eager emotional intensity that had spoiled all my chances. For I knew; that extended, interrupted love I had with Ann was not what I wanted. I wanted her to love me all the time. And Nova? It was as if she had been created to mock Ann, to show me how good it could be. An almost primitive, proto-Christian form of temptation, a Mephistophelian construction designed to appeal to the deepest desires I possessed. I thought about some of the good times Ann and I had had, when I could relax and accept, when she could let down and feel. Could it be that way all the time with Nova? Or would it turn on me the moment I gave my trust fully, turn and destroy me? And would I betray Ann to take that risk? Ashamed, I realized that I would.

"Mr. McNary."

It was DonnaBess, as always with her parcels and bundles. In L.A. she'd be pushing a shopping cart, but those little wheels wouldn't move in sand, I

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realized with amusement. Insight, as usual, seemed to be this woman's function.

"I said, how are you?"

"Oh, fine," I replied. She smiled, and cocked her head to one side.

"Something's troubling you. Can it be a woman." It was not a question. She knew, the perceptive old crone. I nodded.

"An island romance. Sweetness in the night. Love, and its inevitable aftermath: the parting. It's all a dream, you know. This coast, these islands . . ."

"The people?"

"Oh, yes," she said, then broke out with a loud, husky laugh. "The people most of all. I will tell you a secret, my son." She leaned forward and lowered her voice.

'They say that Pele, a goddess of these islands, a goddess of love, travels in many forms. Her appetites are great. If a man befriends her, she will come to him in the darkness and give her love." She winked conspiratorily. "Or, so they say. Now, isn't that a pretty story?"

I was dumbfounded until she smiled broadly and I got the joke. "Yes, DonnaBess, it is. It's a lovely story."

"I thought so, too. And you have a lovely evening, my son."

The letter was from Ann. It was not what I had expected. She said that she missed me and was looking forward to my return. She said that we did need to spend more time together. Guiltily, I thrust it into my pocket while Nova made herself comfortable, but it postponed the evening's conclusion. We sat for a long time on the deck and talked.

She was fascinated with my work, with the story I was doing, and I talked at length about what I had learned from DonnaBess and Calvo Zarco. But when I mentioned the ghost of the radar, she almost came out of her chair. "Now, it's my turn to tell you a story," she said, moving to sit beside me on the couch. I slipped an arm around her.

"Do you know of Lono?"

"I know that he was a god of the Hawaiians. Wasn't he the one that they mistook Captain Cook for?"

"Yes. Cook came ashore not far from here, at Kealakekua Bay. It's not surprising that they made that mistake. Cook's ship was the largest one that anyone had seen. Remember, they were a people of outrigger canoes. A fully-rigged sailing ship must've seemed like Lono's canoe itself."

"Lono's canoe?"

She nestled in against my chest. "Lono was the god-king, a superhuman, superhero, king and chief administrator, father to his people. But while he had the virtues of man magnified, so, too, were his vices. He was a drinker, a womanizer, a brawler, but he had a great temper also and

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this often got out of hand. And he had a conscience. He was man-plus in every way, and it was inevitable that sooner or later he must commit an injustice that even he could not forgive. In a rage, he killed his beloved Queen Kaikilani Alii. He mourned terribly when he realized what he had done, and all of the islands mourned with him."

She stopped for a moment, and I was aware of the sadness in her voice, and of the cool breeze coming off the sea, lying moonlit in the darkness. Like a white band, the fogbank stretched across the horizon, steadfast against the changing weather.

"Lono knew that his power was great and that, sooner or later, he would lose all control and destroy his people, so he made a difficult decision. To take himself away. And he did. He sailed away in a great canoe, vowing to return only when his people would need him, and when he would benefit them by returning."

"And you believe that we saw Lono's canoe on the radar? Three thousand feet long?"

"He is a god," she said, looking up at me. We held the kiss for a long moment. "Well, you must admit that it makes a lovely story."

"Yes, it does."

A gust of cool air swept across the deck, rattling the shutters.

"It's late, Dave. Take me to bed."

I remember waking up once in the night and seeing her, with her dark hair spread across the pillow. The room was in such a position that no moonlight fell within, but my eyes had adjusted so that I could see her face clearly, a few inches from my own, and the focus of all my feelings for her. Of all my feelings about love. And, as I gazed upon her, I felt the deep sadness that comes in knowing that this moment was the peak happiness of my life. That from here on, everything would be less.

At that second she opened her eyes and smiled at me, and I was filled with peace and drifted again to sleep.

The morning was calm. We moved about each other gently, and I had no inkling of anything out of the ordinary until we reached the Kailua Road. It was clogged with people; on foot, horseback, in cars and trucks, all moving toward the little harbor.

"What is it?"

But Nova had no answer. We finally abandoned the Toyota on a side road and joined the crowd flowing along seaward. They were, most of them, of pure or mixed Hawaiian blood, and seemed in a state of quiet ecstasy. When I realized that they were all islanders, I hesitated, but Nova took me by the hand and drew me along.

The crowd jammed the town, the streets leading to the marina, the

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marina itself, but there was always way for us, and we flowed along toward the boats. Nova led and I followed. There were no obstacles. Here and there we saw the puffy faces of tourists, frightened behind windows, peering from doorways, but the crowd ignored all but the sea and the fog beyond. As we crossed the dock out to the finger piers, the people broke into song, a deep and warbling chant, which filled the curve of the bay and rebounded up to the mountains behind, wreathed in their mantles of cloud. A frightened Calvo Zarco was waiting beside the *Slamjack*.

He looked at Nova, then at me, but I had nothing to say. She stepped up to him, still in her striped shirt, the shorts with the brass buttons, sandals. The song went on ashore.

"Can you take us out?"

Zarco looked at me helplessly. I nodded. Nothing made sense now but to agree. I helped Nova down into the well deck and cast off the lines.

The fog had ridden in until it was lying just beyond the range buoys, their red and green lights demarking the boundary of our world with something else. Another time, perhaps. Zarco pointed the *Slamjack* toward that gate, and we rode slowly over the swells, the music of the town following us.

"Tell me what's happening."

She took my hand. "Did you know that the goddess Pele often takes the form of an old woman? She travels about the roads, seeking aid, and rewarding those who give it."

"The goddess of love," I said numbly.

"Yes."

The fog closed around us.

Zarco stood on the steering flat, locked to his wheel as the soft, cool mist swirled over the water. I did not know precisely where he was taking us, but I knew what must be showing on the radar. The song echoed and fell through the empty whiteness.

"Is it over, then?"

"No. It's just beginning. Look."

The great ship stretched in both directions, her immense hull covered with carvings, intricate and beautiful. The sides rose upward, curving, higher than those of a liner, and the assemblage that lined her rail . . . warriors, women, priests, a dozen castes and professions I knew only by feel, for they were the old islanders. The people of the Splintered Oar and the City of Refuge. The people of Lono and Pele. Pele.

"And you . . ." She put her fingers to my lips.

"I am your lover. I will remember you." She kissed me, gently, then drew me close to her. I held my breath.

"Look!" Zarco cried, pointing upward. Two arcs swept the mist above us, the bows of an immense outrigger. Somewhere out in that fog must be a float the size of a cruiser. And I knew. I turned, and she was gone.

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"Nova!" I cried, as the great canoe swept past me and faded, but I thought, just for a moment, that I saw . . .

"Dave. We go back now?" Zarco was staring at me from the wheel, his face white.

"Did you see her?"

"Who?"

"Nova. Pele. The girl . . ."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Never mind. Take us in."

I knew that it was useless, but I searched anyway. There was no Nova Pelley registered anywhere on the Kona Coast, nor had there been, but I had to try.

The native Hawaiians seemed strangely subdued after that. The coast was quiet. Even the weather was stilled. Two days later I flew out, to Honolulu, to connect with a flight to L.A. Home. Back to Ann. Like it never happened.

But I will remember.

EPICENTER

A faint rumble; the desk shakes; an echo.
Adrenalized, my hands falter above the Apple
keyboard and begin to enter a new line:
"A faint rumble; the desk shakes. . . ."
It's as if earthquakes follow the physics
in a bubble chamber, where atoms are altered
or decayed. I collapsed from balancing
my checkbook into this poem, this echo.

—ROBERT FRAZIER

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Julie Stevens writes that she is a lawyer, a writer and a single parent, whose fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Best of Omni *and several anthologies. Her first story for F&SF concerns a telepath who eases the transition between life and death . . .*

The Deathtreader

BY
JULIE STEVENS

The black stallion was first through the electronic gates, leaving all but two others behind as he moved out across the racetrack.

The faint lines of the brick wall that served as a backdrop showed through the holotaped scene; but the fool did not notice. He scratched his bearded chin and chortled with delight as the black stallion broke free from the other contenders to cross the finish line a full length ahead of his nearest competitor.

Loris, the deathtreader, stood in the back of the room, less interested in a holotape she had seen many times before than in Evan's reaction to it. Each time she played the cassette for him, he saw it as something new and wondrous. Even now, having seen this particular tape of the black stallion hundreds of times, Evan turned and reached for Loris's hand, eager to share his excitement. At his touch, a multitude of infantile thoughts and emotions washed over her. When she was assured that he was content, she withdrew her hand.

Professor Friedman came up to her, his young daughter clinging to the hem of his homespun shirt. Drawn by the holo of the legendary black stallion, the girl left her father to cautiously approach Evan.

"Midnight horth," she lisped.

Evan made an incomprehensible series of noises. The child dropped to the floor beside him, and soon they were both engrossed with the horses.

"An impressive animal," the professor remarked with a smile. "Charles Denirian bred it, you know."

Loris nodded. Denirian's black stallion was, in fact, the reason she had left the comparative safety of Northcal to journey into the desolate re-

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gions of the Columbia wilderness. If a mere holotape of the animal pleased Evan, how much better it would be when she gave him the stallion as his own.

Still, she was not altogether comfortable with the bargain she had struck with Denirian's family. She had found it hard to communicate with Denirian's wives through the primitive telexes that provided Portland's contact with the larger cities to the east and south. But one fact had been clear even with her limited contacts: the family was in no agreement as to the wisdom of hiring her, especially when she named her price.

"What would it take to persuade you to remain in Portland for an extra day or so?" Friedman asked. "My students were fascinated; they have a lot more questions."

"They had many as it was," she responded with a smile. "Any one of your pupils could be enrolled at Stanford."

"Instead of being stuck in the Northwest with just a handful of professors to choose from?"

"I didn't mean to insult you," she said hastily. "But Portland is like two different towns. You and your students welcome me, give me free run of your home, and ply me with enough questions to fill a textbook. Yet when I walk through the streets, I get the feeling everyone is afraid of me."

"We don't get many strangers. I think there are no more than a hundred people in all of Portland who've ever met a deathtreader. Besides, don't you find notoriety an occupational hazard?"

He was right, Loris thought. But unlike some deathtreaders who courted danger by practicing their skills in the outlying provinces, she had always stayed close to commercial centers and universities where people understood what deathtreaders could do, and honored them. Even if she were willing to risk her own life among the more superstitious and remote peoples, she did not want to expose Evan to danger. So far, Portland was a pleasant surprise. Her colleagues in Sacramento had arranged for her to stay with Professor Friedman in return for a lecture to his students. She had expected, given the isolation of the city and the fact that it had the only major population in the Northwest, that the people would be less open to strangers. Instead, the students had enveloped her. They were unsophisticated, but hardly unintelligent. Even the physical surroundings interested her; she found herself marveling at the windowless steel shopping towers that dominated the central core, and the brightly robed, hard-faced people who lived in row upon row of identical houses rimming the city.

"None of my students has even seen a deathwalk," Friedman said carefully. "I realize Denirian's family would never allow us to intrude up-

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on their privacy, but others may want your services."

"A deathwalk is very hard on both Evan and myself. I hadn't planned to do more than one. And I have to be back in Sacramento shortly."

"Perhaps you'll agree to one additional walk?" The hesitation in Professor Friedman's voice alerted Loris to the fact that he cared more about her answer than he was willing to admit. "There's a child who plays with mine. His sister is quite ill; I understand she'll die soon. I thought you might . . ." His words trailed off.

The professor had little idea what he was asking of her, she thought. But he was her host, and Loris did not deny his request outright. "I'll see how I feel after walking Denirian."

The professor seemed satisfied with her answer and let the matter rest. "Don't worry about your fool. When he tires of the holo, I'll put him in the yard. It's fenced and protected, but he'll have a full view of the street." The man glanced at the backpack she carried. "You're right that some people in Portland fear deathtreaders. You may need a weapon. I could loan—"

Loris cut him short. "I've had much practice taking care of myself. I have everything I need."

She hugged Evan briefly, then walked through the yard into the street. The sidewalks of Portland were almost deserted, though the smell of fried foods wafted from behind closed doors and she could hear the muffled sounds of households rousing for the day.

As she approached the Denirian estate, she saw that the family was prepared for a funeral. Black and purple drapes covered the windows. The front door stood open, and a narrow black carpet led into the house. There was no doorman, but Loris noted the camera lens fastened to the doorsill and was not surprised to find a tall, dour-looking man coming down the inner stairwell to meet her. He gave her a curt nod.

"I'm Michael Denirian."

"My client's son?"

"Yes. If you have any weapons, please leave them downstairs. There are some people here who might wish you harm, but no one foolhardy enough to try it around me."

Loris would have found his words more comforting if they had betrayed the slightest warmth. She followed him up the stairs and into the sickroom. Denirian's wives and adult children were gathered around him. At first the family did not see her standing in the entrance. Then, as they became aware of her presence, they fell silent.

Her escort remained in the doorway, eyeing the people in the room warily. She watched him a moment, wanting to make sure she would be adequately protected. She had sent precise instructions the day before, but it was difficult to tell if these

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people had any understanding of what she was about to do.

"There'll be illusions — some like shadows and a few that are clearer. No matter what any of you see, you must realize that these are after-images that cannot be interpreted from the outside. If you're frightened, leave the room, but under no circumstances must anyone disturb either my client or myself."

There was no time now to explain further if she wanted to finish before evening. Denirian was an old man, and his deathwalk could easily last hours.

She slipped the knapsack from her shoulders and laid it beside her bed. First she touched the old man's forehead, then ran her rough fingers down his cheek. His skin, stretched taut over high cheekbones, was hot and dry; his pale blue eyes glazed with pain. He tried to say something, but she put her fingers on his lips. Reaching into the knapsack, she removed two slender vials. She forced one between Denirian's cracked lips and tilted his head back. From the second cylinder, she drew thick, cloudy fluid into a syringe and injected it just under one black fingernail of her left hand. Carefully she knelt down and let her body sag against Denirian's frail chest.

"You don't have to speak out loud," she told the old man, feeding her words directly into his mind. "Form the thoughts and I'll hear them."

"If you'll tell me what to do, I'm ready."

"You're well-loved, Charles Denirian. I charged your family a very high price for my services, but they met it. You'll find this journey a gentle one. First I must go deeper into your mind. I'll need help to find your best form, but when I have it, your pain will be over."

As Denirian tried to relax, Loris probed his memories. "This one?" she inquired, showing him the strong, handsome twenty-year-old horseman he had been sixty years before.

He sighed and shook his head. "No, I may have looked fine then, but I was more than a little foolish. Can you find me when I was a wiser man?"

Loris retrieved the image of a forty-year-old stockbreeder on the eve of his third marriage.

"That's better."

She lifted Denirian from his deathbed in that form.

"It doesn't hurt anymore. Am I already dead?" he asked as they walked out of the house.

"No, but I've blocked the pain. and I'll walk you to the edge of death. You understand that I can't go into the afterlife with you? I don't want you to be afraid."

"God will let me into his kingdom. I don't deserve hell." Denirian's tone was matter-of-fact, and for the first time that morning, Loris was glad she had taken this assignment.

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People with long and full lives behind them were a pleasure to walk.

"Do you believe in God Almighty?" Denirian asked.

Loris was silent a moment, not wishing to offend him. "I have my own beliefs about the afterlife. But my profession doesn't depend upon my religion or yours. I've never seen what lies beyond death; yet I know enough not to fear it."

The old man laughed. "Well, I traveled in a land once where the people thought they would come back as animals if they were sinful in this life. I always wanted to believe it. I have a few enemies. I like to picture them crawling on their bellies as snakes in the next life. Of course, I don't know that I'd care to come back that way."

They were walking into an evergreen forest. Loris held the old man's thin hand in hers, and he seemed not to remember that there had not been forests in the Columbia wilderness for more than fifty years. He wanted to talk about his youth; she helped him sift through the memories. They wandered for hours, and she learned much about the man and the stables that had made his fortune. He needed little reassurance. When it was time for him to die, he left her easily and walked on alone, until at last he disappeared into the aura.

When even the aura was gone, she returned to the reality of the sickroom, grateful for the strong arm of the man who helped her to her feet. She brushed away the cup of water that he offered, and turned back to Denirian. The old man's face was stiff and pale in death. She touched him for the last time and gently lowered his eyelids.

A fair-skinned man pushed his way toward her. He held out a leather bag. Loris saw that it contained silver dollars; from the size of the bag, a large number.

"Is this a gift in addition to my price?"

The man drew back a little. "You'll find the bag holds far more than you requested. Surely it will be enough."

Loris did not try to hide her annoyance. "I demanded no money for walking Denirian. But when I return tomorrow, I expect the midnight stallion to be ready."

The man flushed. "We don't mean to offend you, deathtreader. But the black horse was Denirian's own. There is no other racehorse that fast."

"Have it ready in the morning."

He started to say something else, but was stopped by the restraining hand of the man who had brought her to Denirian's room.

"You performed a valuable service for my father," the second man said, his voice stiff with anger. "For that, we'll pay whatever you require. My brothers will have the midnight stallion ready to travel in the morning. If you'd like to spend the night here—"

"I have a place to stay," Loris did

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not care if her manner was abrupt. She would not have asked for the horse if it had not been important to her; it irritated her that these people thought they could so easily change the terms of the bargain.

She left the way she had come in. She was halfway through the yard before she realized the man was following her. "My mother wanted me to see that you had food and shelter," he said as he caught up to her.

"I can take care of myself."

"No doubt. But I'll accompany you to make sure."

His tone brooked no argument; yet Loris saw the man would rather be anywhere else. She scrutinized him carefully. He was as tall as she, close to six feet, and not much older. His hair was sand-colored, worn in a thick braid at the back of his neck. But what both intrigued and saddened her was a certain tightness to his mouth that she recognized from other deathwalks — here was a man who had seen too many battles and too much death close at hand to completely trust anyone.

She shrugged. "I left a friend in the city. You can help me find him."

It was early evening, the sun blurring gold where it could be seen between the buildings. Street peddlers and sidewalk artists hawked their wares in the shadowed entries of the shopping malls. Loris was acutely aware of the stares and side-glances they received. Her boots and black quilted pants already set her apart from the brightly jacketed men and women of Portland, as did her dark complexion and black hair. As she and Michael passed close to customers clustered around the various stands, conversations halted, only to start again in guarded whispers when they thought she could not hear. She would have given much to be back in Professor Friedman's classroom with his eager and attentive pupils.

A hand suddenly clutched at Loris's arm. Through force of habit, she twisted out of the way and reached for her palm laser. A small boy's stricken face stopped her.

"I'm sorry," the child stammered. "My cousin heard you speak yesterday, and his teacher — I mean, I was told you might help my sister. I want —I have heard — you make dying easier. Come help her."

This was Friedman's doing, she thought. Her host was cagier then he looked, though she could hardly fault him for trying. People had stopped and were gathering around them. Michael moved closer to her. The boy stared up at her with fearful eyes.

"I'll come," she said at last, noting the brief surprise that crossed Michael's face.

She and Michael followed the child through a series of dingy alleys, into a clean, sparsely furnished basement. Loris was aware that a number of people had followed at a distance and were now waiting outside to see what

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she would do. Her attention, however, was focused upon the fevered woman who lay on sweat-soaked sheets in one corner of the room. Loris rummaged through her knapsack, gathering together the equipment and drugs she would need. She picked up the woman's wet hand and held it a moment, studying the pock scars that started near the wrist and covered much of her arm. One mark stood out, dark and inflamed. Then she pried open the woman's mouth, probing the cheeks and tongue with her fingers until the woman began to gag.

"Get me a bowl," Loris ordered the brother, who ran to obey.

The woman retched again and again, while Loris held her hand and wiped the perspiration from her forehead. When the vomiting finally stopped, Loris laid the woman back against the pillows. The woman's face was still hot and wet, but she breathed more easily and the convulsive tossing had ceased.

The boy moved closer to his sister. "Are you going to walk Anna now?"

"She needed a doctor, not a deathtreader. Her fever should break sometime tonight. Watch her for another day, but after that she'll be all right."

"Anna won't die?"

"A miracle!" A voice came from the open doorway, and other voices took up the cry. "The deathtreader has raised a woman from the dead."

Loris glanced at Michael in alarm and threw her syringe and vials into the bag. "We have to get out of here."

He nodded and took her by the arm. As they went out the doorway, the small crowd surged around them. Everywhere, Loris heard the pleas for help.

"You can cure my son. He's crippled."

"My eyes. Make me see again."

"I want my wife to get well."

"Please, no," she whispered.

The throng pressed in so tight that not even Michael could pass. He reached through his jacket to a knife that hung from a leather belt. Loris thought it odd that he drew his knife where a more powerful weapon was obviously warranted. But as he raised the weapon to give the crowd a good look at the ornate ivory handle, she heard a muted cry of recognition settle over the group.

"The deathtreader is under my protection!" Michael shouted.

"She has the power to raise the dead. She can help us," a man's voice responded.

Loris could not restrain herself. "No, I can't! I don't have any power to heal the sick or raise the dead. All I do is walk the dying; I make it easier for people to face death, nothing else."

Michael put his arm around her shoulder for a moment, then moved forward.

"Is it always like that?" he asked. "Do people think you can work miracles?"

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"There are some deathtreaders who prey on ignorance. They make it difficult for the rest of us who want people to understand what we do. Besides, are you sure I can't work a miracle? What makes you think I didn't raise that woman from the dead?"

For the first time she saw Michael smile, and she liked the way it gentled his features.

"I know the bite of a shale-spider when I see one," he answered. "You don't run into them much in the Northwest, but the mark it leaves is distinctive. Since it was at least four days old and she was still alive, most of the poison was already out of her system."

"True. So much for my vaunted miracles. To answer your question, yes, it is often like that. At the University of Chicago, where I trained, people know better. There, thanatosophy is a respected profession."

Michael chewed his lower lip. "What would have happened if you had walked that woman anyway, knowing that she was not dying?"

"She would have died."

There was another long pause. She knew what Michael's real question was, and it annoyed her. Yet she found herself wanting to explain.

"There are some who misuse thanatosophy, who become paid assassins. And others who use deathwalks as a means of interrogation — fatal yet effective. The military has always found ways to pervert art for its own purposes. But I bring contentment to people, and I'll not apologize for something so good. It was wonderful walking your father today. He was strong and brave and unafraid in the face of death. There's nothing wrong with a profession that can bring peace to a man like Charles." She gave him a speculative look. "Now tell me about your power. Is the name of Michael Denirian so well-known in Portland that merely flashing his weapon brings respect?"

"It has symbolic value. It was awarded to me when my battalion successfully defended the Canadian frontier against the Bering raiders."

Loris suspected that despite his casual tone, Michael was proud to carry the weapon. Soldiers made her nervous, and she did not press the subject. "My traveling companion is named Evan," she said instead. "He'll wonder why I'm so late."

Near the south end of Main Street, where shops gave way to row houses, she found Evan sitting cross-legged on a mat in Professor Friedman's yard. He did not notice her until she put her hands on either side of his head and gently made him stand up. Then he put his fair, shaggy head against her shoulder.

"So you missed me after all," she said, drawing him into the warm interior of the professor's house, ahead of Michael. "Did you think I'd forgotten?" Behind the kitchen and family rooms was another door. The professor's young daughter watched cur-

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iously as Loris led the two men beyond the dining area into a two-room apartment, but said nothing. As Loris locked the door behind her, she wondered where Friedman was, then realized that he was likely to stay out of her way after having sent Anna's brother to her. A table at the back of the first room was laden with bread, wine, and an unidentifiable casserole. Loris tore a chunk of bread from the loaf and placed it in Evan's hands. The man raised both hands to his mouth and stuffed the bread in all at once. Coarse brown crumbs dropped into his beard.

Loris motioned for Michael to sit, and led Evan to a bench. "It'll take me a moment to get him settled. You're welcome to join us for dinner."

Michael did not speak. His eyes were wide with disbelief as he stared at the simpleton.

"Evan won't harm you. He has the mind of a child."

"Then it is true that deathtreaders steal a man's brain?"

The old accusation stunned her. "I wouldn't have expected such superstitions from you. If you believe that, why send for a deathtreader? Why protect me this evening when you could have run?" Her voice shook as much from frustration as anger. "Just go away. Tell your family to have my price ready in the morning."

Michael continued to stare at Evan, who watched him in return with pale uncomprehending eyes. When Michael spoke, it was as though he had not heard her. "What sort of man was he before you took him?"

Loris's hands clenched into fists. "You ought to recognize the signs of Carr's disease. Evan had had it for months, and he was kept penned in his brother's yard, where he scrabbled for food with the other animals. I paid six copper coins for him, and could have gotten him for less if I'd been willing to bargain. His family never even asked why I wanted him. Are you satisfied?"

"I've heard stories—"

"Fit for children, no doubt."

Michael reddened with embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I've lived and fought in the Northwest all my life and have never seen a deathtreader. I didn't know what to expect . . ."

Loris's anger drained away as he fumbled for an apology. For the second time since she had met the man, she found herself wanting to explain, to make Michael understand. "We require fools to pursue our craft, but we don't have to create them. The victims of Carr's disease are everywhere, usually in circumstances like Evan's. You've seen what happens, they lose all of their ability to reason, and eventually they lose their motor functions as well. It was by accident that the Stanford physicians discovered that the implant procedures used by deathtreaders halted the progress of Carr's disease. He would have died years ago without me."

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Michael looked at Evan, who had discovered the casserole and was devouring it by handfuls.

"Do you ever think it might have been better for him to have died?"

"His life has a value now that would have been lost. I don't know what he was like before his illness, but I like to think he would be pleased to be alive. I treat him well because he's closer to me than any other person could hope to be. If Evan were to die, I would, too."

"Not literally."

"Yes," she corrected him. "The human mind was never meant to handle the experiences of more than one person. Yet when I perform a deathwalk, I leave with every thought, every emotion that my clients ever had over the course of their lives. There's nothing about Denirian I don't know right now, and if I kept those memories for longer than a few hours, I'd go mad. Add his to the memories of all the others I've walked, and my system couldn't tolerate it. I'd die."

"But the fool isn't harmed?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "He feels something when I give him the memories. But I don't think it's pain. No one is sure exactly what happens. Evan doesn't have the intelligence or the discrimination to recall the memories that I empty into his mind." She met Michael's straightforward gaze. "Now you know my secret. To attack me, a person has only to attack Evan before I've given over the memories that I hold."

"You shouldn't tell me that," Michael said. "You don't know that you can trust me."

She considered the ferocity of his response and tried to decipher his expression. She could tell only that she had made him uncomfortable. "Now I'll apologize," she said, pouring a cup of wine and holding it out to him. "I'm sensitive about Evan. You aren't the first to accuse me of exploiting him. In some ways, it's true, but there's no other person more important to me."

"Do you have sex with him, as well?"

"Is that any of your business?"

Michael had the grace to redden; but seeing that a truthful answer would disturb him, Loris refrained from saying that she did have a sexual relationship with Evan. It never failed to amaze her how often people assumed that a man with limited intelligence must also have a limited need for sex.

"As you can see, I'm not familiar with the ways of this city nor how men and women treat each other," she said. "Except what I saw in your father's mind."

Michael broke into a sudden smile, and curved his lean, brown fingers around the wine cup, barely brushing Loris's fingertips. "My father was hardly your best example. He had more wives than any other man in Portland."

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"He lived a long and fortunate life. I don't always enjoy the deathwalk as much as I did today." She smiled, too, remembering. "I think I trust you because your father did, and he was a wise man."

Michael drank his wine in silence.

Behind them, Evan stirred restlessly. Loris turned and wiped the remains of the meal from his face, kissing his cheek lightly when she finished. She said to Michael, "I'm going to be busy for a while. You may stay and watch if you'd like. Later we can talk."

"Do you want me to spend the night?"

"If you wish. Evan and I have traveled alone the past week. I miss conversation, and that alone would satisfy me. But I'd enjoy having you in my bed."

She let him think about it, and turned to Evan. "It's time to show you my day and to see yours." Evan made a gurgling sound and held out his hands. She wound her fingers around his wrists and began to search his memories.

Evan's infant mind recorded whatever he had seen during the day without order or judgment. No event was more important to him than any other; it was up to Loris to wade through the myriad images for particular significance. She often picked up useful information; but there was nothing in this day's events that told her much except that Professor Friedman had treated him well.

When she finished the search, she began the neuronal transfer of those memories she had gathered from Denirian. Evan would hide them away where they could not disturb her waking hours. He jerked slightly, and then, as always, the tears came. He laid his head on her shoulder and silently cried. She wished she understood more of what was happening to him during this phase. He never remembered, and there was no permanent effect that she could see, for the two of them had repeated this scene at least weekly for six years.

Her life was bound with his. She could not be a deathtreader without him, and he would not be alive without her. It was more than a medical fact; it was an emotional one as well. Yet, despite her brash defense to Michael, she could not remember a time since the first neuronal transmitters were implanted at the University of Chicago when she did not harbor doubts as to what she had done to Evan.

The tears had ended, and Evan was on the verge of sleep by the time she finished. His head lolled on her shoulder, and a thick lock of sun-bleached hair fell forward across his face. Loris smoothed the strands back, not for the first time envying her companion's ability to sleep anywhere.

It promised to be a long night. She had discovered early in her training

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that she could not rest after a deathwalk. Sometimes Evan stayed up to keep her company. More often, if she was in a city and its people were friendly, she would visit the nearby taverns and bring home a likely looking prospect. It was not a method that particularly pleased her, but six years as a deathtreader had taught her to expect no more. There were too many superstitions about a deathtreaders's ability to steal one's mind; even educated men were wary around her. Ignorance and alcohol were usually her biggest allies. Tonight, at least, would be different. Michael was an attractive, intelligent man, here by unclouded choice.

Loris stood up, pulled Evan to his feet, and led him into the next room. After settling the fool on the bed, and exchanging her dark jacket and pants for a long, sleeveless tunic, she returned to find Michael sprawled on the cushions in the corner.

"Is that what you were doing with my father?"

"Joining minds? No, though I achieved something even better with the drugs. I could see into Denirian's dreams as well as his thoughts. I used both to conduct the deathwalk. You can tell the difference because there are no afterimages between Evan and me." She pushed back her cropped curls to show him the mottled scar on her right temple. "See? No magic. It's a purely surgical procedure. Through it, Evan shares all the thoughts and feelings I collect when we are in direct physical contact. But he locks them away where they can't torment him, which is more than I can do."

"If he shares your thoughts, why doesn't he also have your intelligence?"

"Carr's disease damages his ability to make sense of the information he receives. The transmissions between us keep the disease from progressing, but do nothing to make him any better."

Michael seemed about to ask her more. Then, perhaps because he saw how tired she was as she sat down beside him, he swallowed his questions and poured her another cup of wine. She took it gratefully and began drinking the wine in small sips. The wool of his jacket was rough against her bare arms. She did not really mind, but he took it off anyway.

His body was lean and hard, a shade lighter than his sun-weathered face. A long white scar curved from the right shoulder to just under his rib cage. Another formed a straight line across his abdomen.

"Perhaps I was just clumsy."

Michael's voice startled her, and she laughed in spite of herself. "So you're the one who reads minds."

"No, but I've never had anyone stare at me quite so openly. Are you impressed?"

"I think you must have enjoyed fighting, to have that many scars."

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She meant to tease him, but his answer was serious. "I enjoyed it too much. The stakes were higher than I thought, and the losses too great for it ever to be worthwhile. It took me long enough to recognize that." He shook his head as though to clear shadows thrown by his last words, and smiled at her. "I'm a soldier in a land that no longer needs soldiers, which is fortunate. Now I raise horses and try to keep Father's home in shape. But I could leave Portland if I wanted to."

"Yet you don't."

"The time has never been right. When I came back from Canada, Portland required defending and I was needed. Then my father got sick, and I was needed even more. I'm the one child who shared his affinity for horses. Father was always obsessed with breeding racehorses. My brothers and sisters think it might salvage Portland's economy. Once we become known for the quality of our animals, it's possible people could be enticed to the Northwest for the races, the gambling."

"That's what you want for Portland? To make it a gambling mecca?"

"I want prosperity. There aren't a lot of choices. We can hardly revive the old Pacific trade routes singlehandedly; and we produce little that the rest of the world values. Our factories barely meet our own needs."

As though to prove Michael's point, the light cast by the single overhead lamp dimmed. He gave Loris a wry look. "Even running the remaining elevators taxes what power the Columbia can produce. But now that we have bred the black horse of legend—"

He stopped short, as though he realized he had touched upon a sensitive issue. "We have stronger animals, maybe not as fast, but ones more suitable for traveling. We'd give you as many as you wanted."

She stiffened, then chose her words carefully. "Your family agreed to my price. If Denirian wasn't worth it, you should have said so."

"I thought it necessary to attempt to change your mind," he said softly. "My father deserved a peaceful death. He was in so much pain that his wives would have given anything. It wasn't a unanimous decision. I, for one, voted against bringing you here. Who knows how long he might have lived? It isn't much different from euthanasia to use a deathtreader. But Father had traveled a great deal when he was younger, and he was intrigued with deathtreaders. He wanted some of their insight, some of their magic. Still, I don't believe he would have gone though with the deal if he'd known your price."

"The Denirian stables have bred one horse this fast; surely it can be done again. Besides, you don't know that the animal will breed true."

"No, but we've never come this close before. And we're afraid we

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lack our father's skill. He was self-taught when it came to horsemanship. So many steps he took were part of his own peculiar logic. At any rate, you did as you were asked, so if it's the midnight stallion you want, you'll get it. But perhaps we could arrange for breeding privileges."

"You don't have the facilities to transport or store semen in Portland —at least none you can count on."

"Mares can be brought to Northcal."

It was a nicely timed plea, she thought, too much so to be accidental. It amused her that she should be drawn into Michael's trap this easily. Nonetheless, what he asked was not unreasonable.

"We can arrange it," she replied. Then she smiled and asked, "What would you have done if I said no?"

"I always have backup plans. Right now the midnight stallion is servicing every available mare in Portland. I hope he's enjoying himself." Michael reached out to her. After a moment's hesitation, she allowed herself to be drawn into his arms.

Long after Michael had fallen asleep, Loris raised her head from the cushions, cradling her cheek on one hand. Restlessness was to be expected after a deathwalk, but her mood was compounded with a vague dissatisfaction. Michael shifted in his sleep, turning his face toward her. He was not as grim while he slept, and much more vulnerable. She wished she had known him sooner or longer, or that he was a different sort of man, one who might be persuaded to leave Portland, if only for a short while.

Her reverie was broken by a soft, shuffling sound. She glanced at the doorway to see Evan standing there, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "It's too early to be up," she told him. She rose and took him back to his bed.

Evan mumbled unintelligibly, but she understood that he did not want her to leave. She did not plan to. Of all the men she had known, and of the many who had shared her bed during the past six years, none offered her the loyalty of Evan. That she sometimes bedded other men was nothing he would ever hold against her. She lay down beside his still, pale body, and, guiding him gently, made love for the second time that night.

It had rained, and the street in front of the Denirian home was dotted with shimmering puddles. Loris hugged her black woolen jacket close against the morning chill and checked to see that Evan was warm. He carried his own knapsack across his back, and hers dangled by one strap from his arm. A glimmer of expectation shone in his eyes, making her glad she had taken the extra time this morning to see that he understood about the midnight stallion.

Denirian's six wives were in the entry hall to greet her. Their adult

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children, sullen and suspicious, massed behind them. Loris rested her right hand on her hip within easy reach of her laser. She did not anticipate a fight, but the air was thick with hostility. She caught a movement off to her right and saw that Michael had entered the room and positioned himself between her and the wives. She did not know whether to be comforted or not. His expression was carefully neutral.

The oldest of the wives came forward and held out a finely wrought silver belt. "You don't seem to wear jewelry, but we thought you might use this. It's a gift, to go with the payment and for the breeding privileges." The woman did not wait for an acknowledgment. She thrust the belt into Loris's hands and brushed past her, indicating with a wave of her hand that Loris and Evan were to follow.

The midnight stallion was corralled beside the stables. Its coat gleamed from repeated brushing, and someone had braided its mane into tight ridges that rippled along its neck. A brown and silver saddle marked with Charles Denirian's initials had been placed on the animal's back; even the bridle appeared to be new.

Loris gripped Evan's wrist, not so much to control him as to feel his reaction to the animal. She caught the flood of emotion as Evan saw the beast in the flesh. She held onto the simpleton for a moment, making sure he understood that the midnight stallion was to be his. Then she freed his wrist and unlatched the corral gate. There were murmurs of surprise from Denirian's gathered family as she closed the gate behind Evan, and they realized she was leaving the fool alone with the horse.

"It's too dangerous," Michael snapped, his hand on the latch.

Loris stopped him. "Wait. Evan knows what to do."

The yard was oddly silent as the people watched Evan approach the horse. The man moved slowly. When he was still some distance away, he halted. The horse whinnied and pulled back. The fool stood quietly until the animal calmed down, then he slowly reached out to stroke its head. He blew gently into the horse's nostrils. When the animal blew back, Evan gurgled with pleasure and hauled his stocky frame onto the saddle. The stirrups had been adjusted for Loris's taller figure; Evan ignored them, letting his legs dangle along the horse's sides.

Loris heard Michael's sharp intake of breath as Evan cantered around the edges of the corral. "You taught him well."

Loris shook her head. "I didn't teach him at all. He's always seemed to know how to ride. Now you see why I had to have the midnight stallion. Evan saw it race in Northcal once, and ever since, it's been the

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one thing in the world he's wanted."

She could not read the look on Michael's face. He seemed simultaneously taken aback and furious.

"That's all you're going to do with the midnight stallion? Give him to your fool as a gift?"

She glanced at Evan, who, oblivious to anyone else in the courtyard, was riding the horse in large circles around the corral.

"Yes," she said, turning back to Michael and meeting his unwavering stare. Nothing in his demeanor indicated the slightest understanding of why she had to have the horse. Why had she ever thought Michael might be different from the other men she had come across in her travels as a deathtreader? A weariness came over her, and she wanted nothing more than to gather up her belongings and leave with Evan.

"You don't care that Portland needs the black stallion? My father's dreams mean nothing to you?"

It was not his father he was talking about; she saw that in Michael's bleak face. He could not, would not understand what Evan meant to her. Unable to give him the answer he wanted, she told him the truth.

"Evan's dreams are more important to me."

A high-pitched equine scream split the air, and the yard was suddenly filled with noise and confusion. Loris saw the black stallion rear, its front hooves catching the eastern sunlight. Evan made scarcely a sound as his body slid down the left haunch of the horse and came to rest under the flashing hooves. Bright red blood spilled onto the ground, matting his hair.

In a flurry of activity, several men and women threw out ropes to capture and control the horse, which had backed away from the fallen rider and was desperately trying to find a way out of the corral. Loris pushed the people out of her way and climbed over the gate, crying out to Evan.

The horse crossed the corral, leapt just as it came to the wooden bars of the fence, and for a single moment seemed to be suspended in the air. Loris saw the feathered dart protruding from the stallion's shoulder. It was a child's dart, meant to enrage the animal but not to harm it. She doubted that any child had thrown it. The horse's back legs caught on the top bar of the corral, but it kept running, Michael and many others in pursuit.

Loris knelt beside Evan and cradled his bloody head in her lap. She let her consciousness spill over into his mind and searched for signs of life. Evan stirred in her arms, and she steadied his thoughts, soothing the pain that he felt.

After a long while, she looked up to see Denirian's family standing around her. Michael was in front, his face showing many emotions — pity, confusion, sorrow.

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"The horse?"

Michael shook his head. "One leg was broken and the other badly torn. I destroyed him. Your friend is all right?"

Loris nodded. "He's more frightened than hurt." Michael helped her lift Evan, and together they brought him out of the corral. A young girl handed Loris damp cloths, which she used to stanch the blood from Evan's scalp wound. He was bruised, but the cuts and abrasions along his forehead were not deep.

A timorous male voice called out to Loris. "Deathtreader, can you bring the stallion back to life?"

Loris shuddered, frustration bringing tears to her eyes. "Damn you! I don't work miracles. I only walk the dying!" her voice rang harsh across the yard, but she saw no comprehension in the people's faces, only fear and disbelief.

She took Evan by the hand and turned to the oldest of Denirian's wives. "I want two horses saddled and ready to go as quickly as possible. I'll also need a change of clothing for Evan."

The woman gave orders to the other wives. The rest of the family, at her bidding, dispersed.

"Loris."

She did not want to see Michael, but he put himself in front of her and would not move. Deep lines of grief were etched into his face, and she remembered that it was he who had killed the stallion.

"I'm sorry about the horse," she said.

"Now we'll find out if I'm as good a stockbreeder as my father. If I succeed, you still have your payment coming." He hesitated a moment, then added, "I'm sorry, too — you had the right to use the stallion any way you wanted."

"You still don't understand about Evan, do you?"

"I find your relationship with him . . . distasteful. But I have nothing to be proud of, myself. I was jealous this morning. I left without waking you because I couldn't bear to share you with your . . . friend. When I saw him fall, I thought then the horse might have to die to save him. And I didn't know which one I would choose. I still don't. It doesn't say much for me that I might have put an animal's life above a man's."

She almost reached out to put her arms around him. It would have given her a measure of comfort, and him, too. But in the end, she picked up Evan's hand in hers and walked toward the stables where Michael's brothers waited with two brown and white horses. All the way across the yard, and even after she and Evan were mounted and were leaving the Denirian home, she was aware that Michael continued to watch her. She never once looked back.

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Alan Boatman tells us that he is a graduate of the University of Michigan, a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford and now lives in Southern California with his wife and daughter. His novels SUMMER'S LIE and COMRADES IN ARMS were published by Harper & Row. His first story for F&SF is a superior Jekyll & Hyde variation about an anthropologist who undergoes a change in personality, a change for the worse . . .

Agua Morte

BY

ALAN BOATMAN

Is civilization, as some have said, only a thin veneer over the darkness of our animal natures? Is man, indeed, a wolf to man?

God knows, there is evidence enough. It is summer now, six months since it happened, and still, in the early hours of the morning, I look at my sleeping wife, my dreaming daughter, and that night with Eric Litten haunts me. Was it the knowledge of the sickness, or the disease itself? The Brazilian Indians? Or was it, somehow, me?

In the early hours of the morning. . . .

Eric suffered in silence from the growing awareness before I knew anything about it. But for me, it began and ended in the darkness of that winter night. That night — six months ago — I had been sitting at my desk behind a stack of unfinished test papers, with an almost-empty pen in my hand, when the telephone rang.

In the warmth of the room, the only light a desk lamp, lulled by the whining of the wind outside and bored with student prose, I'd been on the verge of falling asleep. The electronic warble brought my eyes open, and I sat up with a little jolt and dropped my pen.

It was nearly 1:30. The words that formed in my mind, with queasy certainty, were inevitable: *Somebody has died.*

The telephone kept ringing. I looked at it for a moment to see if it would stop. Wrong number? *Aren't you coming to the party?* At last I stumbled over and lifted the receiver with false boldness, hearing the querulous sound of my hello in the wind-interrupted quiet of the room.

"John?" said a voice. "Are you still up?"

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With what relief. Not death — only Eric Litten: old friend, respected anthropologist, chronic insomniac.

I began to breathe again. "What are *you* doing still up? Seeking the in a friendly phone call? Nothing on the late show to nod you off?"

"This isn't a friendly phone call," he said, and I noticed then the tightness in his voice. Alcohol? No—stress of some sort. "Or maybe it is. I guess I need a friend tonight. John, could you come over here?"

"You mean *now*?" I'd never heard that odd tone in Eric's voice, and I had known him a long time, since college in the sixties. But when I looked out the window, toward the streetlight, I could see nothing but whiteness. "What for? Is something the matter?"

He hesitated, as if working out the right way of putting it. "Well, yes, I'm in a little trouble. Something is happening to me. I'd really rather talk to you in person. Can you come over here right now?"

"All right," I said. "Yes, I'll come over. Are you going to be all right until I get there?"

"I think so. I don't know. Hurry, will you?"

"Yes, I'm on my way."

I looked in first on my daughter, checked my wife's faint, regular breathing, wishing I were there beside her, and slipped out into the storm.

• • •

Eric had implored me to hurry, but it was bitter out, with that incessant wind roaming the empty streets, blowing up whirling fountains of snow into my headlights and over the windshield. Eric, a settled bachelor, lived rather reclusively in a high-rise away from the campus and my house, made more distant now by the blizzard. Shivering through the white darkness, I nearly got lost, and it was a frozen fifty minutes before I parked in a snowdrift around the corner from his building.

The security guard on duty nodded sleepily and refrained from asking why anybody would come visiting on such a night. Lacking a sensible answer, I hurried into the elevator, and up. The building was underheated, but after an hour spent creeping across the buried city, it felt like Florida.

Eric's apartment was on the twelfth floor, at the end of the hall. I'd barely knocked when the door opened with an inrush of air.

"John, you're here. Come in, come in."

As I stepped into the apartment, Eric glanced out into the hall, closed the door behind me, and locked it.

"I was afraid I'd go out or something before you got here."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

He took me by the arm and pulled me into the living room. His right hand was bandaged, and I noticed there was tape over a web-shaped

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crack in the sliding glass door that opened onto the patio.

"Have an accident?"

He looked down at his hand, as if he'd just discovered the injury. "In a way. . . . I'll explain this," he said, but made no effort to. "Take your coat off. It is bad out?"

"According to the Weather Channel, it was worse in the winter of '37."

Eric nodded seriously, then caught my look, and gave a pained smile.

"Oh. Of course."

He suddenly gestured to a captain's chair, beneath a wall grouping of South American Indian masks. "Sit down! Can I get you something? Scotch, or—"

"A little scotch might help my cold bones, Eric."

"Damn, yes. I'm sure it would. You've earned it." On the counter that separated the dining area from the kitchen were a bottle and several highball glasses.

"I've been holding this until you got here. I'm going to have one myself," he said with a kind of false bluffness. He poured a shot — and tossed it back with one swallow, eyes shut and gritting his teeth, then tried again with a second shot, swallowing repeatedly this time, coughing into his bandaged hand.

"It's not going to make any difference," he muttered, scrape-voiced, grimacing. "But maybe. . . ." He seemed to be talking to himself.

He turned abruptly to look at the fireplace, built into the wall across from the windows. There was a fire burning in it. Without another word, he threw his glass at the fireplace, then screwed his eyes shut again and stood there, the bottle still gripped in his left hand.

"What did you — What's the matter?"

He didn't answer, and I said with frustration, "Eric? Just what the hell is going on?"

Eric opened his eyes slowly, and set the bottle down on the counter with exaggerated gentleness.

"Something is happening to me," he said, in the same tone of voice I'd heard on the telephone, the voice that had asked me to come visiting in the middle of a blizzard midnight.

He was trembling, and I got up and steered him away from the counter to the sofa.

"Sit down here. What do you mean, something is 'happening' to you?"

He took a ragged breath. "It's a little hard to explain."

I poured my own drink at the makeshift bar, and sat down across from him in the captain's chair, wondering what kind of trouble somebody like Eric could have gotten into.

He looked at me for a moment, then folded his hands and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees.

"John, you've known me a long time. Would you describe me as, well, impetuous?"

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"Of course not. The opposite. You're the kind of person who never does anything before thinking it out —and often not then."

This was in the nature of an understatement. Despite success in a field requiring objectivity toward the sometimes bizarre customs of exotic cultures, Eric was essentially a Puritan. He had in fact been raised a Calvinist. Some people, among them Eric, are permanently marked by that sort of thing. I was his friend, but our life-styles had always — to put it politely — differed.

He nodded, and closed his eyes again, either my reassurance or the whiskey seeming to calm him.

"Yes." After a moment, he said, "What I did with that glass. I did that on pure, simple impulse."

I shrugged, waiting. "All right. So?"

He smiled, and repeated, "So. So now I'll tell you — a story." He leaned back on the sofa, even calmer now, and began, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"Last week, when I got back from Brazil, I told you about my trip." I nodded. "But I told you only part of it, about locating that tribe out beyond the gold country, on the Xingu. I mentioned that among the things we traded them for was a small quantity of a substance they extract from some jungle plant, to use in their ceremonial rites. Remember?"

"Yes."

He sighed, examing the bandage on his hand. "Now, here's the part I didn't tell you. I guess the reason I didn't was that I'm ashamed of it.

"On the way back, we stayed at a river town north of São Felix. I don't know the name of the place, or even if it has a name. There's nothing to it but a kind of general store, and a rather primitive hotel.

"There were half a dozen women there, employees of FUNAI, the government agency that oversees the Indians, stopping on their way to São Felix. So that night there was an impromptu party in the hotel bar.

"By ten o'clock or so, things were hopping, the fellows in our group and the women and the whiskey. But I was in a rather low mood, John. I sat at a table and watched the party. You know I've never gone in for that sort of thing, and I guess that was the trouble. I felt lonely and depressed. I had just completed an 'expedition' into the rain forest — Colonel Fawcett stuff, you know; lots of material for my book, widened horizons and all that — and instead of celebrating, I was sitting there watching other people have fun. The more I thought of it, the more it irritated me, and I made up my mind to get drunk, so for once in my life *I* could have fun too.

"One of the girls was watching me, and it made me nervous. It made me angry. That was when I got my bright idea. I bought a bottle of whiskey and took it up to my room. I got out the container of that Indian drug,

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and mixed a little of it with the whiskey. I felt like a hippie. I thought that 'acid' would give me some kind of high the whiskey couldn't. It was a stupid idea. Quite indefensible. The sort of thing *you* would have done, back in college," he added, with an odd smile.

"When I went back downstairs, the stuff was already beginning to work. Dr. Jekyll giving way to Mr. Hyde. I managed to make small talk with that woman, God knows how, and another drink from my bottle was enough to take care of my remaining inhibitions — she didn't have any. After that I remember very little, but instead of being on the fringe of the party, I was in the middle of it. When it was over, I slept for a day and a half."

Eric stopped talking, and I waited for him to continue. When he didn't, but instead got a sort of glaze over his eyes, I said, "You mean you finally got laid?"

"John, please." He was studying his bandage.

"O.K. You had a wild night in the Brazilian boondocks. I'll admit it sounds out of character for you— but so what? You enjoyed it, didn't you?"

"You don't understand." He got up and started wandering around the room. "John, I'd never done anything like that before. Never been *that* drunk. Never been — promiscuous."

My patience was beginning to wear a little, partly from the lateness of the hour, and partly from the growing suspicion that, far from gaining a problem, Eric had *lost* a few of his troubles in South America.

"All right. Is your conscience bothering you? Did you leave a Brazilian miss 'with child'?"

He stopped pacing, over near the bar.

"No, no. You're missing the point." He looked at me for a moment, then put a hand to his forehead.

"My problem . . . my problem starts with what happened *after* that night. What's happened since I got home."

He turned and reached for the bottle, then looked for the glass he had thrown in the fireplace. Remembering, he got another from the bar and poured a shot. He did not try to chug this one.

"What would you do if you found yourself, unexplainably, undergoing a change in personality?"

I mulled over his story, his "confession," watching him: the thinning, still-dark hair; the evasive eyes that caught and held you when they wanted to; the tired, strained face visible in the firelight.

"A change for the worse," he went on. "A change that frightened you, that you couldn't really believe was happening, yet was happening. That you tried with all your power to stop, and couldn't stop."

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For a few more seconds, I looked at him, not musing now but trying to figure out the point, the expected answer.

"I'm beginning to think I'm cracking up," Eric said. "I'm turning into a different person."

The wind rattled the sliding glass to the patio, and because of that he almost missed the knock. He glanced at himself in the bar mirror, and went to open the door. "Hi!" she said, and he hesitated and answered quietly, "Come in. . . ."

You're an English teacher, John. Do you know a story by Poe called 'The Imp of the Perverse'?"

"I suppose I've read it. Why?"

"Because it fits my situation since that damned party. The imp of the perverse. You start doing things you don't want to do. I mean — you *want* to do them, yes, some wild instinctive part of you does — but you don't really want to; you know you shouldn't."

"You mean you don't want to, or you feel guilty for wanting to? Which is it?"

"It's — both."

He didn't elaborate, and I said impatiently, "What've you been doing?"

"Odd things."

"For instance—?"

"Well . . . I started driving like a maniac. Taking chances, getting *angry* at people. I never did that before."

I just looked at him, and he waved a hand.

"That was the *beginning*, John. Then — there are the women in my course."

"Ah. Much more sinister. Any luck?"

"As a matter of fact," he said woodenly. "As a matter of fact. . . ."

He turned to her after closing the door, a perplexed expression on his face — the usual Eric look, completely at a loss — and the girl smiled brightly at him. They stood there a moment, regarding each other silently.

"It's Carla, Mr. Litten. Carla Hutchins. From your nine o'clock. I'm sorry to bother you so late," she said, the smile contrasting with the words.

She was all bundled up in a black or navy blue coat, with a white scarf around her head, and little white gloves and boots. She was carrying several notebooks and was pink with the fresh cold glow from outside. He was looking at her with his mouth open — but he knew who she was. He had not forgotten her name.

"Mr. Litten." Gazing into his eyes. "I'm so glad you're back from Brazil. I need help so badly on this physical stuff. I mean the structural differences between Australopithecus *and* Homo habilis. . . ."

"Oh — of course. It's all right."

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(Putting her notebooks down, slowly unbuttoning her coat. . . .) "Would —would you like something to drink?"

He was the old Eric now, and I almost laughed. I did laugh, remembering him in Utah the summer I had gone with him and a couple of friends who were students in geology. We had camped forty miles out from anywhere, and I scribbled on a novel every day and drew landscapes, while the others crawled around the rocks looking for faults, or hunting for something that had been alive so they could study it. At night three of us drove into a town called Coby, while Eric stayed behind in the tent. We would come in at 3:00 A.M. to find him perusing sedimentary facies, correlation of stratigraphic columns, principles of superposition. Such dedication, such unselfconscious abstinence, had brought him here: to a high-rise bachelor flat and a low-paying, though scholastically rewarding job.

"My friend," I said, in my best patronizing voice, "you are coming out of the monastery, into the world. I drink to you."

Eric seemed scarcely to have heard.

"Three days ago," he said, in a slow, wooden voice, "I was in the dean's office, talking to him about my book. I noticed he had a new Mont Blanc fountain pen he was making notes with while we talked. He got called out of the office for a few minutes, and he laid the pen down on his desk.

"While I was waiting for him to come back, my eyes fell to that new, shiny, expensive fountain pen, and before long I realized I was staring at it. On an impulse I picked it up. For some reason I felt an overpowering urge to steal it. I knew I didn't really want the thing, and I am certainly not a thief, and I knew as well that he couldn't possibly fail to miss it when he came back. Yet, the more I stared at its smooth, elegant shape, the more certain I became that I was going to put it into my pocket and walk out with it.

"My hand was moving toward that pocket when the dean came back. I managed to hold up the pen and admire it; then I handed it to him, and of course he never suspected. But I knew that if he hadn't come back at that moment, I would have stolen his pen. The question is: Why?"

Eric sipped desultorily at his whiskey.

"Everyone has an occasional strange impulse like that," I said. "I don't know why. It doesn't happen often enough to be. . . ."

I stopped, because Eric was shaking his head at me.

"Wait," he said.

"The day before yesterday, late afternoon, I was driving home from the college. It had just started to snow,

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and the streets were beginning to glaze over and be slippery.

"I was a few blocks from here when a man came out of a drugstore and started to cross the street in front of me. He would have made it all right if he hadn't slipped and lost his balance in the middle of the street. I had to slam on the brakes to keep from hitting him.

"But the odd thing — the horrible thing — is that, while I was pumping the brakes, while my car was shuddering and sliding on the new snow, I was watching that man, and I was wondering what it would be like to hit him.

"I took my foot off the brakes and put it on the accelerator, and I pushed it to the floor."

Eric paused. There was a moment of silence before I said softly, "And did you hit him?"

He shook his head. "I jammed the accelerator so hard the wheels spun. Before I could get any traction, he'd made it to the sidewalk. He looked at me as if I were crazy."

Eric stopped again, the word hanging in front of his lips, floating on the air, repeating itself inside my head, and, perhaps, in his. He poured some more whiskey. I didn't say anything. He sipped it and coughed.

"Other things. Minor things, not serious. Like the fountain pen. Like breaking a whiskey glass for no reason other than that I wouldn't ordinarily do it. They help confirm the fact that there's something wrong with me." He shrugged.

"Last night I almost assaulted a little girl."

"Now, wait." He paused as I got up and stepped over to him. My sense of humor was beginning to erode. I took the bottle and freshened my own drink.

"I went out for this whiskey," he continued as I leaned against the counter. "There's a place on the corner. I was nervous and upset because of the things that had been happening, and I knew I probably had no business even going outside, but I couldn't figure out what I should do.

"This girl — she was about ten years old — came out of a grocery store, carrying a sack. I don't know how the idea flashed into my mind. But it began to sort of — fascinate me. . . ."

"Does it fascinate you now?" I interrupted coldly. I was thinking of Karen, *my* ten-year-old, safe at home with her mother.

"John, of course not. That's exactly the point! It is repulsive! But the more repulsed I was by it, the stronger it became. The streets were almost deserted, and there was an alley up ahead between the buildings. And I knew — I knew that when we got there. . . ."

"But you didn't," I said, louder than I intended.

"No. No. Thank God." His face had broken out in perspiration. "A

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car pulled up at the curb, and it was her mother. The girl got in, and I kept walking, past that alley . . . to the liquor store." He added slowly, as if to himself: "But I would have."

I waited to see if he had any more to say, but he began to drink again, not looking at me. I didn't know what to make of it. It wasn't Eric — or, not the Eric I had always thought I knew.

I decided to be logical and scientific, pushing away the image of my daughter, and the automatic anger that came with it.

"All right. Do you have any idea *why* you've been doing these things since you came back from Brazil?"

"Ideas, yes. Answers?" He stared into his glass, lifted against the fire. "All I know is, that night, that party, did something to me. That first impulsive act . . . I don't know, maybe it triggered something in my mind."

"Do you think," I said, "it could be that drug you picked up from the Indians? Could it be potent enough to last this long? Or could it have done something to you that would only now be showing up? What is it, anyway?"

He set the glass down. "Of course, it was the first thing I thought of. The Indians have their own name for it, which translates as *aqua morte*, the water of death."

"A switch on our *aqua vitae*," I said, but he didn't respond.

"The plant they extract it from is a big secret — and there are a lot of different plants in the Amazon Basin. They use it to ease the suffering of the dying, and in their puberty rites —and, incidentally, for almost everything else. They say the child-soul must die, in order to give birth to the man."

"So for them, the child *is* father to the man."

"So it would seem," he said distractedly.

"Who are these Indians? Kamayuras? Wauras?" Eric had discussed these in his book.

"Smaller tribe yet — we don't exactly know where they derive from." Thinking about it, his professional interest began to draw him back from himself. "Possibly the Mehinaku. There are a dozen Xingu River tribes, all of which speak different tongues. There are no more than fifty of these people left, and they're hard to communicate with. Their language is as obscure as their derivation, and they seem to be high most of the time on *aqua morte*. It drives the FUNAI workers mad."

"If I remember right, you said in your book the Mehinaku are obsessed with sex."

He shook his head, frowning as if I were a careless student.

"No, I said they are openly sexual. It isn't the same thing. True, their religion and daily customs are very erotic. Casual adultery, phallic gods, and so forth. This tribe has a similar mythology, but is otherwise decidedly

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different. 'Obsessed with sex'? Hardly!"

Eric Litten, who, so far as I knew, had been a virgin until that night in the river-town hotel, could discuss this subject at length, in the abstract.

"Eroticism is the question, John, the great paradox. Oh, the debate is old; it goes way back: Are primitive peoples, closer to nature, healthier than we are? Is their open sexuality *purer* than our uptight Puritan inhibitions? Have we something to learn from them about ourselves? Or are they simply that — primitive — with their dreams of flying penises and giant vulvas? Are they steeped in superstition and taboo, while we move toward an enlightened understanding of our sexual natures?

"These people — the men, that is —have a great *fear* of sexuality, female sexuality. Great fear," Eric repeated, as if he could sympathize. "There is rigid gender segregation against what is obviously a grave psychological threat. Without the *aqua morte*, it is questionable whether they could perform at all. That may well be the reason their numbers are so few."

"A culturally induced impotence?" It seemed suicidal.

Eric nodded. "Not exactly a survival trait. The *aqua morte* may be all that stands between them and extinction."

"And yet," I said slowly, "there is nothing particularly potent in the substance itself?"

"Not that we are *aware* of," Eric emphasized. "Yes, it is an intoxicant, a mild hallucinogen. An aphrodisiac? Maybe. But the primary effect seems to be psychological. They believe that it makes them potent. *Ergo*. . . ."

"Then why is it working on you?"

He shook his head. "The problem is, our sample is now as inert as water. They imbibe it fresh, and likely so did I. It may be coming back on me, recurring the way LSD has been known to do." It sounded wishful, and he suddenly looked unsure. "But I wonder, John; the amount I took— could it be sufficient to bring about these changes?"

"If you aren't used to it," I speculated. "Or maybe in conjunction with your psychological makeup?"

"Yes, of course," he nodded, and began to lapse into depression again. "It's more likely psychological than pharmaceutical — an unleashed id, if you want to call it that. Chained up all my life, then set free one night in an uncharacteristic act of self-indulgence."

He had drifted back to the sofa, and he twisted around suddenly, so the whiskey sloshed in his glass, and he was looking at me with his dark eyes and a curl to his mouth.

"Do you remember that summer in Utah?"

"Strange," I said. "I was thinking about it a little while ago."

"I had a marvelous time that summer," he said fondly. "I learned a hell

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of a lot, and got a thesis out of it, and finally proved to myself that I knew what I was doing and liked it, that anthropology was my field." He looked away. "It's only lately that I've thought about what you others got from that summer that I didn't get. Do you know what I mean?"

I said slowly, "I believe I do."

"Somewhere along the line, I missed out on a whole segment of life."

Eric looked at me again in that strange way, pursing his lips, as if he wanted to say something but was not sure he ought to say it, or not certain how.

"I think," he said slowly, "it was knowing you that helped make me—timid. I think I tried to compensate for you, John."

It took me a moment to realize I was being — not insulted, exactly, but something akin to it, if more subtle and intended not to insult but to inform, perhaps to inform Eric; the Calvinist background asserting itself one last time.

He put his glass down empty, got up and began to poke at the fire, looking at me and quickly glancing away. "I'm sorry, but it's true. It's funny the kinds of friendships you form. The reasons for them, the bases for some friendships. It's funny."

"I guess it is," I said.

"And you're the one who got married and settled down. That, too. And I stayed just the same."

He laughed, and I thought he must be drunk. "An unleashed id. Free will, John — literally. *Is* there such a thing? I feel as if I *have* no will — or no control over what may be pure will."

"The problem," I said, "is how to recapture it and chain it up again—with reasonable running room, this time."

"Yes, of course," he echoed. "The problem. . . ."

"Because," I went on, "if you don't get some kind of help, and soon, who knows what might happen? You're liable to hurt someone, or yourself."

The fire had burned down to almost nothing. Eric tossed a chunk of wood onto it and began stirring the coals with a poker. He seemed to forget I was there. I sipped my drink, wondering what had caused this aberration. What did it have to do with the way I'd led *my* life? Or with an obscure Brazilian plant that, for all anyone knew, had *begun* "inert as water"?

As if to himself, Eric murmured, "I almost hurt someone tonight."

"Would you like a drink?"

"Oh, I'd love something to drink! I hope I'm not disturbing you at this hour. You did promise you'd help me —remember?" The bright smile. "God, it's freezing tonight. But it's cozy in here. You've got the fire going, and everything."

He coughed. Carla was out of her coat and scarf, her gloves tucked in

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to a pocket, lifting a slim leg to remove a boot.

Carla. . . ."

Eric hesitated, probed at the fire, and went on.

"Student of mine. Pretty thing. Little — but strong." He touched his face with his bandaged hand, again seeming to forget I was there, as if I were only an extension of himself, a projection of his mind with which he was trying to come to terms.

"She had it all worked out, but differently. It wasn't what she expected at all. She couldn't understand. . . . It wasn't what she expected."

I felt a hot rush of alarm, both at his words and the look on his face.

"Eric — you didn't. . . ."

"Out! Out! Get out!" he screamed, and she rushed to grab her coat, holding the torn blouse together, backing away from him toward the door — too slowly, he told himself, too late; she wasn't going to make it, she wasn't. . . .

He started toward her again, and she had the sense, at last, to save her own life. No false pride, no bravado. She turned and rushed out the door, leaving it wide as she ran past the elevator to the stairs, and Eric, to avoid following her, went and put his fist through the sliding glass door.

"I would have hurt her," he said with deceptive calmness. "Beaten her, raped her, or — worse. *Why*, I don't know. Only that I would have." His voice was nearly a whisper. "It was close, John, very close. I bandaged my hand, and covered the crack with tape to keep the wind out. I knew I had to call somebody."

He played with the coals, then drew out the poker and tapped it on the hearth. The sound went out in little chunks across the room, the end of it glowing like a tiny, fading soul.

"I had to call you. Nobody else would understand. Nobody knows me so well. There's nobody else I've been close to, looked up to. They would think it was my own fault, an inner flaw — and in an odd way, I suppose it is. All my life has been my fault." His face changed slowly, whether with wisdom or resignation I could not tell, and he cocked his head, as if listening to an inner voice, and looked down at the poker in his hand, as he tapped it and tapped it.

He took it in both hands, and swung it at my head.

It missed me by an inch, with a whipping sound, and he swung it again as I flinched, knocking a piece of wood out of the arm of the captain's chair. I cried out and tried to grab the poker away from him, but he caught me above the wrist, and I felt a numbing agony that deadened my arm to the shoulder. The next blow glanced off my cheekbone, and I fell

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sideways, overturning the chair.

He kept beating at me with a kind of gleeful energy. I could hear him grunting with each stroke, like a bad golfer, as I lurched crablike across the room with Eric on top of me, flailing wildly, connecting with every third or fourth swing. I toppled over a lamp, and fell into the sliding door, which, already damaged by Eric's fist, shattered as he pounded it, cutting my face. Neither of us made a sound, except for my panicked, and Eric's labored, breathing.

Somehow I shoved on through the broken door, as the wind keened into the room, billowing curtains high to flap and wave like the ghosts in Eric's mind.

The cold took my breath away. Despite the blizzard, there was almost no snow on that gale-scoured patio. I pressed myself into the farthest corner, where Eric, having paused to slide open the door, found me, the poker raised point downward, ready to impale me on its still-glowing end.

Halted by the blast, he lowered his hands and looked in amazement at what they held. He turned and flung it back into the room, dropping to his knees, head down. His breathing came, ragged and shivering, for some moments before he spoke in a detached, exhausted voice I could barely hear above the wind.

"Now — you see. How it happens."

He looked up when I didn't answer.

"John. I'm sorry! Are you badly hurt?"

I didn't think so, but I wasn't sure. The cold was dulling some of the pain.

"I didn't want to do that," he said. "You are — my best friend — you know."

"Yes," I said. "I know it, Eric."

"Some sort of madness," he said objectively. He took a deep breath of cold air, and let it out.

The storm-wind gave a mournful howling as it cut into us. Eric put an arm around my shoulders. I managed to get to my knees, and we knelt there like monks frozen at their prayers. I was hurting in several places now.

"Cold," Eric said. "Let's — get inside."

Only partly from the pain, I shrugged his arm from around me, and he stood up and leaned against the railing as I crawled toward the living room on my knees and one hand. The glowing fireplace looked far away, and I was thinking about my wife and daughter, at home, safe from the storm.

"I'm grateful to you, John," Eric said, without a hint of shivering.

I turned my head to look at him. In the wind his hair blew wildly, so I wasn't sure where his eyes were. His face was gray with cold, and his head dropped toward the frozen railing, and he looked over it. Pausing thoughtfully, a small smile on his lips,

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he put a hand on the railing.

"Eric," I said. But I could only watch.

It was like something done on an impulse, as he lightly vaulted over the railing, as if it were nothing more than a little fence, to fall twelve floors to the street below.

I turned back toward the distant fireplace, dancing now like a tiny candle flame, approaching and receding. There was no sound but the wind.

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Today we smugly know that astronomical phenomena do not, as our ancestors believed, foretell disaster. Of course, folklore sometimes does have a shred of truth in it. . . .

Stones

BY

EDWARD F. SHAVER

And David chose him five smooth stones out of the brook.

— First Book of Samuel

It was *luck,"* the physicist said sharply, his scowl wasted on the shadows of the conference room.

He paused, nodding with satisfaction at the uncomfortable rustling his words evoked from the darkness around him.

"We are doing the best we can under the circumstances, Dr. Marsden." The voice came from nearby, but the physicist didn't bother to turn away from the image that filled the wall in front of him.

"You've wasted precious time," he answered, tapping a switch that repeated the sequence of frames. "But it doesn't matter anymore. I've found what I was looking for. This visible-light photograph was made last week at Mount Palomar during the course of a routine survey. The bright object in the center of the screen is our target: asteroid number 433, commonly known as Eros."

The image froze, and the physicist stepped forward, sweeping the outline of his hand slowly across the points of light. "Elongated shape . . . maximum diameter of fifteen miles, typical carbonaceous chrondrite composition. All the vital characteristics have been mapped in detail since its discovery in 1898." Marsden paused again, tapping the switch on the projector.

"Now I've superimposed the same area photographed in the infrared wavelengths." The white crescent of the asteroid suddenly grew a hazy tail

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that reached out toward the left side of the screen.

The room was once again filled with the shuffling of feet and the shifting of chairs. The physicist squinted up at the blurred image, waiting for a question that never came. Perhaps they didn't know enough to ask, or perhaps they were merely frightened. In the end, he saved them the trouble, speaking softly as he stared at the screen.

"Eros is on fire, gentlemen. Our time is running out . . ."

Andrea Collins lay with open eyes, watching the full summer moon as the gentle surf formed a lulling background to her thoughts. The warm hand still caressed her, running in slow, teasing circles down her neck, across her breasts, and along the sensitive skin of her belly.

"You're crazy, you know," she murmured, closing her eyes to the moon. "What if someone had come along? We'd both be in jail for indecent exposure."

"Maybe," the man answered with a smile hidden by the night. "But it was worth the risk. In fact . . ."

The hand drifted lower, and Andrea opened her eyes with a protesting laugh.

"You do feel lucky tonight, don't you?" And she had already resigned her brief struggle when she heard the ringing that came faintly from across the beach. She frowned at the intrusion, planting a firm hand against the muscled chest that was moving over her.

"The phone," she whispered, craning her neck toward the glowing lights of the beach house.

"Let it go, Andrea," the man answered, pressing closer. "Just this once, let it go."

She closed her eyes for a moment, ready to surrender to the impulse, at least for once. But the phone rang with a persistence that refused to be ignored, and she found herself rolling to her feet, groping blindly around the blanket for her bathing suit.

"I'm sorry," she offered weakly. "But it's after three in the morning, and the damned thing won't quit. It must be something important." She shook her head, giving up the search for her clothes as she started naked across the beach.

"Important," the man groaned. "I hope it's a damned obscene phone call . . ."

At first she walked, certain that the phone would go silent now that it had successfully broken the spell of her lovemaking. But the ringing only seemed to increase its tempo as it drew her closer to the house. Andrea stumbled up the steps of the deck, cursed as she caught her foot in the darkness, and hopped painfully into the brightness of the house.

"Hello," she snapped into the receiver, rubbing the injured foot with her free hand.

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"Andrea," came the man's voice, familiar enough to drive away her pain. "I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"Jeremy?" she asked after a moment's pause, her curiosity dissolving back into anger. "Damn you, Jeremy Rawlings, it's three o'clock in the morning out here, and I'm on vacation, and you just interrupted a damn good . . ."

"Whoa . . ." Jeremy protested. "I'm not ready for any tales from your love life, Andrea. I've got a different kind of offer for you."

"Not as good as the one I just missed," she said crossly, pausing a few seconds before she added, "Well, I'm listening, damn you."

"Good," Jeremy continued with undisguised satisfaction. "Things have been happening here at the institute, Andrea. A couple of military types from Washington showed up yesterday afternoon. They've got a project going that's top priority, and they're looking for a topflight marine biologist in a hurry. I thought you'd want to know, vacation or not."

"Well, what's the project?" Andrea asked. "I'm not going to fly back from Hawaii just to rubber-stamp some environmental impact statement on the fish industry."

"It's more than that, Andrea," Jeremy said slowly, choosing each word. "Much more. But the rest you'll have to hear in person. It's their game, and those are the rules. But I know it's something you wouldn't want to miss, Andrea. The chance of a lifetime."

"Jeremy . . ." she began, suddenly realizing that Rawlings wasn't alone at his end of the phone. Someone else was listening; someone that wanted her services without making a down payment of information. Perhaps it was just the military's way of obscuring a perfectly simple explanation, but she found herself hesitating. "Jeremy, is there really a need for all this secrecy?"

"You know the government, Andrea," he answered. "It's not a good show unless it's classified." He laughed, but it came from the head and not the heart. "You'll have to catch an early-morning flight out of Honolulu, and I'll have a car from the institute waiting at the airport in San Diego, O.K.?"

Andrea listened to the steady hiss of the telephone lines, her heart beginning to race as she tried to read the unspoken words into Jeremy's voice.

"Your tickets have already been arranged, Andrea," Rawlings continued a moment later. "See you in a few hours."

Then the line clicked once, and she was left with the random noise of the telephone that seemed to whisper its own unintelligible warning. She laid the phone back in its cradle and walked out onto the deck.

The surf still rolled gently up onto the white sand, and the moon still

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glowed through a bank of high clouds that raced across the stars. But now it was all different, like a canvas drained of color. She didn't have to go, of course, and maybe Jeremy had tried to tell her that between the lines. Perhaps they had made him call her, and perhaps he had been trying to offer a warning, as well as an invitation.

Andrea blinked up at the moon, letting the struggle between her curiosity and her fear rage unbridled. A cool breeze stirred in from the ocean, making her shudder as it wrapped around her body. And then it was over, resolved as quickly as the dying of the wind. She shook her head, released a long breath that carried off the last of her resolve, and turned back toward the house.

The sun burned down through the afternoon humidity, sapping her strength with each passing minute. Andrea shielded the sun with one hand, hanging on to her seat with the other as the boat surged through the surf toward the dock. The island seemed little more than a collection of low hills and green vegetation rising up from the clear blue water of the Caribbean; indistinguishable from uncounted others that clustered throughout the Bahamas. Yet this island *was* different; and the presence of two armed MPs on the dock made certain reminder that this wasn't just another field trip for the institute.

The boat jostled against the mooring, and one of the MPs stepped forward to help Andrea up to the dock. She accepted the grasp of strong hands, and a moment later found herself staring into Jeremy Rawlings' familiar grin. Next to him stood an unsmiling military officer whose unadorned khaki uniform made it impossible for her to guess his rank or branch of the service. And behind them both stood a small, wiry man of late middle age whose clothes seemed to indicate that he was as much out of place as Andrea. His eyes were hidden by sunglasses, but she could feel his scrutinizing gaze cutting through the darkened glass.

"I see you survived your trip." Rawlings nodded.

"No thanks to you," Andrea returned, brushing the short brown hair from her eyes. "I get off the plane in San Diego and find two of these military types waiting like vultures. I get shuttled onto a military flight that stops at every desert airstrip between here and California, and then I get dumped into a damned rowboat for an ocean cruise. Next time I'll go first-class, if you don't mind."

"I apologize for the inconvenience, Dr. Collins," said the officer. "You must understand that Dr. Rawlings called you at our request. The arrangements for travel were made on short notice, and there wasn't much time to worry about comfort."

"I see." Andrea arched her eye-

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brows at Jeremy, waiting for an introduction to the older man, who continued to watch in silence.

But Rawlings only coughed nervously and then motioned for her to follow as he turned to lead the way along the dock.

"We're already late, Andrea," Rawlings said apologetically. "I know that's a bad way to get things started, but it can't be helped. Let me give you a quick tour of the complex and show you the way to the dormitory. I'm sure that nature must be calling after the boat ride. Then we'll have a meeting with General Thurmond."

Andrea felt momentarily lost as she watched Rawlings hurrying along the pier. She exchanged another quizzical look with the nameless stranger before she scurried after Rawlings.

"Look, Jeremy," she insisted when she reached his side. Her breath was coming harder as they began to climb a set of wide concrete steps that led up through a thick grove of palm trees. "Don't you think we can dispense with all this secrecy bullshit? I'm here, my vacation is completely ruined, and all I've got to wear is this one damned sundress. I've *paid* the price to know what's going on."

"I know you have, Andrea," Rawlings nodded, glancing quickly over his shoulder. "But I'm not in charge. My job in this enterprise has been to identify and contact the people needed for the project. General Thurmond makes all the decisions about what goes on here. That includes who knows what . . . and when."

"But *you* know what's happening, don't you?"

Rawlings climbed in silence for several moments before he nodded once.

"And does your original promise still hold?" she asked between gasps of the heavy air. "Is this still the chance of a lifetime?"

Rawlings came to a halt as he reached the top of the stairs, glancing back as he waited for Andrea to mount the last few steps. "Guaranteed," he said without a smile, and then nodded out toward the opposite side of the ridge.

The island opened away to the west, twin projections of land that curved around a shimmering bay of clear water a half mile wide. The western slope of the ridge was studded with collections of low buildings whose concrete walls gleamed white under the high tropical sun. At the far end of the northern crescent, a large radio dish stared up into the clear sky, while the top of the southern ridge was crowned with a series of radar domes.

"Impressive," she whispered, wiping a trickle of sweat from her eyes. "I don't suppose you built this with alumni grants."

Rawlings laughed quietly and motioned toward a Jeep that idled patiently a few steps away. A moment later they were sweeping around the

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tight turns of the road that led down into the heart of the complex. Andrea looked back just before the crest of the ridge was lost from sight, exchanging a final questioning stare with the stranger.

And it was only then that a faint hint of recognition sparked in a corner of her mind. She couldn't find a name or even a reason. Only a lingering certainty that the man with the sunglasses was important, and his presence meant the beginning of something she might soon regret.

"You surprise me, Dr. Collins," General Thurmond said as he offered his hand.

"In what way, General?" Andrea waited stiffly, though she had already seen the answer on his face. Why science and good looks were expected to be mutually exclusive, she had never understood.

"You seem too . . . young," Thurmond squirmed uneasily. "To have acquired a reputation of your caliber, I mean. If Dr. Rawlings has been accurate in his descriptions, you are the foremost authority in the world on the languages of dolphins and whales. Is this the truth?"

Andrea followed the general along one of the half-a-dozen concrete causeways that sliced out into the bay. Rawlings was following a few steps behind, but he offered her no help beyond a fleeting smile.

"If there can be such a thing as an authority in a subject that's still mainly conjecture, then perhaps I'm one." Andrea shrugged as the officer glanced over his shoulder.

"Yet it's not totally conjecture, is it?" the general continued. "The military has been using trained dolphins for surveillance purposes since Vietnam. And the shows put on by the amusement parks must have required some understanding of communication between the species."

"We've learned some basic mechanics," Andrea answered with a shake of her head. "We've identified the frequencies preferred by the different groups and subgroups of whales, dolphins, and porpoises, and we've made recordings. The animals are smart enough to learn conditioned responses, and that makes it possible to teach them tricks and simple tasks. But as to actually understanding *their* language . . ." She shook her head.

"And why would you say that is?" the general asked as he came to a stop on the pier.

"Money, I guess," Andrea answered with another glance back at Rawlings. "Research has gone about as far as it can without someone investing a lot of money and a lot of time. I suppose no one has thought it important enough. At least, no one with the necessary resources."

"Until now," the general concluded. He crossed his arms on his chest, letting his gaze wander out

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across the smooth water of the bay. A disturbance rippled to the surface about a hundred yards from the pier, and suddenly a long white flipper darted up into the sunlight. It hung for a long moment and then melted slowly into the bay as the large body rolled lazily on the surface.

Andrea stepped up beside the general, shielding her eyes with both hands as she ticked off the details that were visible in the distance: the mottled black skin with patches of white on the throat and belly; the long, slender flippers; the stubby, humped dorsal fin. She clicked her tongue when she had finished the identification, stepping back from the edge of the pier.

"Megaptera novaeangliae," Andrea said with a nod of certainty. "From the size and texture of the skin, I'd say it was a female of middle age."

"A humpback whale," the general echoed in English. "Dr. Rawlings informed us that this would be your candidate of choice. He tells me that its songs are legendary among marine biologists for the complexity and that their origins are speculated to be older than man himself. We've brought you two specimens, Dr. Collins. A male and a female. Dr. Rawlings thought that would maximize the amount of natural communication for study."

Andrea frowned, darting another quizzical look at Rawlings before she tried to muster her limited stores of diplomacy.

"What you say is true, General. But I must admit that I'm still confused about why I was brought here on such short notice, and why the military is suddenly interested in the songs of the humpback whale."

The general nodded slowly, but his gaze remained fixed on the whale as it slowly navigated across the bay and was joined by a second mass of dark flesh rising from the depths.

"Fair questions, Dr. Collins," he said. "But I'm afraid I can't tell you much without biasing your scientific objectivity, and that's a chance I won't take. What I will do is offer you the use of the equipment and facilities here at the complex. That includes a staff of programmers and technicians for data acquisition, and the use of a dedicated Cray supercomputer for data analysis. That's the best hardware the government has at its disposal anywhere. I've already shown you your subjects." The general nodded out toward the bay. "The rest is up to you. The only *other* condition . . . is time."

"Time?" Andrea repeated weakly.

"Time, Dr. Collins. I'll have to ask that you devote yourself twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, until you can give us an answer. If that seems like an unreasonable request, let me assure you that the outcome of your work might be vitally important to a great many people. Perhaps even to everyone alive today, Dr. Collins."

The general cast a narrow gaze at

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the woman, judging the impact of his words, and he wasn't disappointed.

Andrea's mouth fell slowly open and she felt suddenly like a mouse that had been dropped without warning into a maze. Her first impulse was to belt Jerémy across the face for getting her mixed up with some secretive military mind game, and she was vaguely aware of her hand clenching instinctively at her side. But the general was holding her gaze, offering up a harsh kind of sincerity as collateral for the answers he couldn't divulge.

"But what are you looking for?" Andrea asked as she opened her fist. "There must be a reason for all of this."

"We are looking for a witness, Dr. Collins," the general said as he turned and headed back along the pier. "The witness to a crime . . ."

"Lunch break," Rawlings called loudly from the pier, waving as Andrea bobbed in the water a short distance out on the bay. A moment later two other divers broke the surface and followed her back toward the bulwark of white concrete.

Rawlings waited patiently as she clambered out of the water, shedding her tanks and mask in a dripping pile at his feet.

"I brought you today's special from the officers' mess," he said proudly as he offered the brown paper bag. "Egg salad on wheat."

"Marvelous," Andrea grimaced as the navy divers followed her out of the water. "Thanks, guys," she said. "I shouldn't need you again until day after tomorrow, unless we lose another hydrophone." She turned toward Rawlings, pulling the zipper of her wet suit down to her navel. Her breasts lunged suddenly into the light, and Rawlings smiled quickly at the lack of tan lines.

"Modesty, Andrea," he cautioned with a mock frown of disapproval. "General Thurmond has asked that I remind you you're not in southern California. Around here, a naked woman draws a little more attention."

Andrea grimaced and shook her head. "Come on, Jeremy. You want me to put on a damned fashion show every time I get out of the water? Next you'll tell me I've been slacking off in my work." She finished with a frown as she plucked the bag from Rawlings' hand.

"Well . . ." Rawlings stalled with a smile, turning his attention out to the bay. A bushy spout of spray erupted from a hundred yards away as one of the humpbacks churned to the surface. "I must confess I've been sent to gather an informal status report. It's been nearly two weeks, and you've been very quiet."

"I've been very *busy,*" Andrea corrected as she munched sullenly on the sandwich, content to let Rawlings break a sweat under the midday sun.

"Is there anything you need in the way of equipment?" Rawlings prodded gently.

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"You've got to be kidding," she answered. "This place is a researcher's dream. Do you know they have the entire bay wired for sound? Every noise that Harry and Helen make, we get on tape. I wouldn't be surprised if the poor things develop cases of paranoia before we're finished. And as for data analysis, their computers can almost run the show by themselves. I can have a sound recording analyzed and cross-indexed a hundred different ways within fifteen minutes after it's made. Almost real-time. I've already logged more than twenty different song sequences I've never seen referenced in the literature."

"And that, I assume, is Helen?" Rawlings nodded toward the shining mass of flesh that was moving leisurely past the pier.

"They had to have names," Andrea nodded sheepishly. "Our biggest problem with them is going to be weight. The navy has contracted with some local fishermen to provide a steady diet of live fish, and I think they're both getting fat."

Rawlings laughed quietly, waiting for Andrea to finish the sandwich before he continued. "The general would like your first detailed report in another week. Do you think you'll have anything to give him?"

Andrea drew a long breath as she sat down on the pier, her wet suit squeaking with the effort.

"I'm working like a dog, Jeremy. I know it's been two weeks, and I *have* broken some new ground. But you still haven't given me anything more definite to look for, other than the general's cryptic remark. Witness to a crime?" She shot a disbelieving glance up at Rawlings. "How will I know when I've found what you've brought me here to find?"

"You'll know," Rawlings said with a maddening certainty. "I'll be disappearing for a few days, Andrea. Don't be alarmed."

"Where are you going?" she asked, a little more quickly than her pride would have liked.

"The Apennines of Italy," he answered, holding up an open hand to halt the flood of questions obvious on Andrea's face. "Someone from the general's staff will check in every day to see if you need anything, and I'll talk with you as soon as I'm back."

"Jeremy," she said suddenly, coming quickly to her feet. "Maybe you're all just playing a game, but it's working, damn you. Can't you give me something more? At least the name of your mysterious friend in the sunglasses? He gives me the creeps." She shivered slightly, forgetting the tropical heat as she remembered him watching her from the pier, never saying a word.

"It's no game," Rawlings returned evenly. "And I've told you a hundred times: General Thurmond wants you working on your own and unbiased by anyone else's convictions. Just give us the means to communicate with

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the whales, Andrea. Not only will you understand what's going on, but I'll personally guarantee you the cover of *Time.*"

With that, he turned and retreated along the pier. Andrea watched him until the sound of the humpback dragged her attention back to the bay. The huge animal was rolling slowly under the sun, its flippers clawing aimlessly at the air.

Perhaps it was Rawlings's reference to *Time,* or perhaps her memory had finally decided to relinquish its treasures. But whatever the reason, the name was suddenly there, and she knew who came to watch her from behind his sunglasses. For the first time since her arrival, she began to realize this was much more than an experiment of temporary importance to the military. For the first time in her life, she began to wish she weren't quite so clever, or quite so arrogant.

The whale spouted again, sending another cloud of white spray into the air.

What do you know that these men are so anxious to learn? she asked wordlessly as she sank to her haunches on the pier. *And what will happen when I give them your secret?*

Andrea was staring at the computer screen, oblivious to the world, when Rawlings entered the control room. He watched the shifting, spidery displays from over her hunched shoulders, waiting for his presence to finally invade her senses.

"Just take a number and I'll get back to you," Andrea mumbled, rubbing at the fatigue that dried her eyes and blurred the patterns dancing across the screen. "What day of the week is this?"

"A Wednesday, I think," Rawlings answered after a moment's thought. "Though I wouldn't bet on the date."

Andrea drew a long breath and shoved herself away from the console, spinning around to face Rawlings. "How long has it been, Jeremy? Five weeks now, and I'm still casting around in the dark." She shook her head. "I'm trying to decipher hieroglyphics without a Rosetta stone, Jeremy. I'm looking for a needle in a haystack, and I'm not even sure I'm in the right damned haystack." She sputtered into silence, staring down at the floor before she added, "Has it ever occurred to you that the job might be too big for me?"

"Perhaps," Rawlings nodded sympathetically. "But in that case, it's probably too big for anyone. I told Thurmond you were the best in the world, and I haven't changed my mind. Now what did you have there on your magic screen?"

Andrea felt her frustration rise quickly to grapple with her weariness. She could launch into her usual tirade and shout her accustomed questions, forcing Rawlings to don his mask of inscrutability. But tonight

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the anger drained uselessly away before the ritual was begun.

Damn it, Andrea, she thought as she mirrored Rawlings's expectant stare. *They'll have you trained yet . . .*

But she merely swung back around toward the console as her fingers played quickly over the keyboard.

"I'm learning some things about the language we're trying to crack, Jeremy. I think I understand why the problems have been so hard to solve." The screen flashed to life with a series of plots. "This is the frequency plot of one string — a word, if you will. At least, the closest thing to a word you'll find in their communications. The unique thing is that its meaning depends on your frame of reference." She paused, glancing over her shoulder. "It's as if a word in English took on different meanings depending on whether you were sitting down or standing up. Do you follow?"

"Fascinating," Rawlings nodded as he pulled up a chair and sat down next to Andrea. "A three-dimensional language . . . but perhaps not surprising for creatures that inhabit a three-dimensional environment like the sea."

"True," Andrea nodded. "And I'm sure that's how it evolved. But it makes the job of translating a nightmare. Not only do we have to record the particular sounds made by a particular whale, we need to plot the whale's physical relation to other subjects as well as to the surrounding environment." She turned again toward the screen. "This particular plot is the first we've identified. It's used a lot by both of the whales, and I inferred that to mean it was a common noun or verb. Unfortunately, I couldn't seem to get a direct correlation, for the reasons we've already discussed. But once I realized that the meanings of identical sound sequences were dependent on physical orientation, this one became easy."

She leaned back with a satisfied look, letting Rawlings simmer in his own curiosity.

"As a verb, it means *up* or *down,*" she said finally. "As a noun, it means *bottom* if you're pointing down in the water; it means *surface* if you're submerged and pointing up; and *sky* if you're on the surface." Andrea gave a wide, triumphant smile as Rawlings ingested her logic.

"Very good, Andrea," he nodded. "A nice piece of work. You said this was the first word you've deciphered. How many others do you have?"

Andrea's smile dissolved into a frown as she stared into the screen. "Another half a dozen that I'm getting close with, Jeremy. But none I'd bet my life on."

"What you need is a good night's sleep," Rawlings said as he came to his feet.

"What I need is a night on the town, Jeremy," Andrea leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. "*Any* town. I need to get stinking

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drunk and dance until some guy has to carry me home. *That's* what I need." She opened her eyes as Rawlings reached the door of the control room, hesitating a final moment before she fired the question she'd been holding like a loaded gun for the past three weeks.

"What does the world's leading astrophysicist have to do with all this, Jeremy?" She smiled faintly as Rawlings froze in his tracks, his eyes narrowing in the dim light. "It *is* George Marsden who's been parading around here in his sunglasses, isn't it?"

"Well . . ." Rawlings managed as he stepped back into the room. "How the hell did you do that, Andrea?"

"The sad part is that it took me so long." Andrea swung around in the chair, folding her arms across her chest. "The man won a Nobel Prize three years ago, remember. He was on the cover of *Time.*" She nodded at the wake of honest confusion that swept over Rawlings's normally implacable features. "My question still stands, Jeremy. What's the connection with my work on the whales and an astrophysicist?"

"Not yet, Andrea." Rawlings drew a deep breath of resolve and shook his head. "The military is still adamant about maintaining your objectivity, and they have a good reason. You're to be the double blind, Andrea. The independent verification of what Marsden already believes to be the truth. Because of that, they would be very unhappy to learn what you've already uncovered on your own. I trust you'll keep it to yourself." He turned again toward the door, looking back from the threshold.

"It won't be long, Andrea," he said softly. "You're closer than you think."

And then he was gone.

The days passed in a blur of steamy afternoons on the pier and endless nights with the computers. Andrea stopped using the mirror in her living quarters, afraid of the face that began to stare back at her with deep, listless eyes. Rawlings would talk with her every night when he wasn't off on one of his frequent expeditions, and his confidence seemed to rise in some perverse proportion to her fatigue.

"You're going to kill me," Andrea had said one night, only half in jest.

"I hope not," Rawlings had answered, squeezing her hand.

But Andrea's heart was already racing as she watched his eyes, suddenly more concerned with the words he had left unspoken.

I hope not . . . but it's a risk we have to take . . .

If this was the price you paid for thinking you were the best, she had certainly learned her lesson. The days of Andrea Collins, *wunderkind,* were over, and she prayed only for a chance to use the wisdom. If working a little harder to solve the problem they had given her would help, she would do

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that, too. The military technicians soon learned to understand her monosyllabic instructions, and her universe became the laboratory, and the pier, and the whales who seemed merely content to guard their secrets in silence, and feast on the never-ending supply of fresh fish.

By the end of the ninth week, Andrea had built a *Cetacean* vocabulary of almost twenty words. The routine had become so ingrained that she followed it like a robot, long since having sacrificed the job of discovery. This was work, pure and simple. A means of escape from a game she didn't understand, and no longer yearned to conquer.

First, the computers would identify a song sequence that seemed to be repeated in the repertoire of the whales. Then a correlation analysis would be done using sound and visual recordings of the humpbacks, attempting to draw the meaning out of the physical context. Once the meaning of a particular sequence had been guessed, it was played back for the whales, to check their responses. Some times Andrea's efforts were quickly rewarded; other times the whales didn't seem to care, as if they knew the ancient songs were merely being spewed out by a machine, and had nothing to say in return.

But in spite of the successes, she knew they were still months, and perhaps years, away from the answers that Rawlings and the general awaited with endless resolve. She knew, but she worked on doggedly, letting her pride carry her far beyond the point of no return. She knew, and because of that she laughed like a madwoman when the military itself provided the most important piece of the puzzle.

Andrea had been peering over the shoulder of a nameless lieutenant in the small monitor room on the pier, watching the displays as the latest song sequence was played back for the benefit of the whales. She had guessed the meaning of the word to be *turn,* but Harry and Helen had been listening to the song for almost an hour, showing no inclination to offer a response. She had been ready to shut down the experiment, when the three army helicopters appeared over the western rim of the bay, swooping low as they headed for the landing zone on the eastern shore.

"Damn them!" Andrea screamed as she watched the water of the bay kick up beneath the prop wash. "Lieutenant, get on the line to the tower and remind them we've got an experiment in progress. They promised they'd keep the traffic clear, damn it. They promised!"

"Yes, ma'am," the lieutenant said, hurridly reaching for the phone.

Andrea seethed in silence as the readings jumped with the noise of the helicopters skimming over the bay. Perhaps they were in the middle

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of an unsuccessful run, but it was her experiment, and they were going to play by her rules. She had reached for the cutoff switch of the recorders, when the displays began to jump again, but this time they were triggered by something more than the low-frequency rumble of the aircraft.

The whales were filling every channel of the hydrophones with a song whose patterns looked unfamiliar even at first glance. Andrea frowned as the song continued to repeat, even after the helicopters had disappeared from the sky. And then she had begun to laugh, indifferent to the open-mouthed stare of the lieutenant or the quiet pleading of her own rationality. With the intuition of a lifetime of research, she knew that *this* was the key to the kingdom.

Now all she needed was the courage to use it.

The ringing of the phone dragged Rawlings from his sleep, insistent in the darkness of the small room.

"Rawlings here," he coughed quietly when his hand finally found the receiver.

"Jeremy," came Andrea's voice, faintly mocking. "I hope I didn't catch you at a bad time."

"What?" Rawlings sat up in bed. "Andrea, what's going on? Is this a joke or just revenge for a past offense?"

"Neither," Andrea said, the word barely a whisper. "I've got the answer to your riddle, Jeremy. Now you owe me some answers."

"You've done it?" Rawlings asked, kicking off the sheets as he scrambled out of bed. "I knew you could, Andrea. I'll call the general at first light and set up a meeting . . ."

"Forget the general," Andrea hissed. "I want my answers *now,* Jeremy. From you. I'll be waiting at the computer center."

"Andrea . . ." Rawlings began in protest, but the sharp click of the phone line cut him short. He stared into the receiver for a long minute, as if it might offer some lingering hint of explanation, and then he quickly got dressed.

Andrea turned away from the computer at the sound of the door, her face washed in the green glow of the screen. She nodded at the empty chair next to her, watching in silence as Rawlings warily sat down.

"Isn't this all a bit melodramatic?" he asked, searching her face for the emotions that had registered so clearly over the phone.

"I'm only playing by your rules, Jeremy," Andrea answered evenly. "You got me into this with a touch of melodrama, didn't you? Now it's my turn." Her eyes flashed in the green light, hard circles of determination that drilled into Rawlings's head. "Tell me what you're working on, Jeremy. You and George Marsden, and everyone else who's been shanghaied to

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this damned island."

"Andrea . . ." Rawlings began feebly, shifting in his chair.

She moved a hand to the keyboard of the terminal, resting her fingers on the keys.

"One touch," she said quietly, her eyes never blinking as she watched him. "And I can purge all my files. Then you can take me home and find someone else to play your game." She arched her eyebrows in question, waiting for the look of surprise to fade from his face. "Now give me the answers, Jeremy."

Rawlings frowned as they exchanged a silent stare; each weighing the other's resolve. Through it all her eyes never wavered, and in the end he reached a hand into the pocket of his jacket. It returned to view holding a microdisk, which he held out to Andrea.

"Load this on the computer," he said.

Andrea followed his instructions, and a moment later the screen offered up a detailed graph that ran along the horizontal axis of the display.

"That's a time line," Rawlings began, edging closer to the terminal and tapping one of the keys. "It begins 700 million years ago," he continued as the display began to shift from left to right, showing more of the plot. "And continues up to the present."

"And what are the bright bars?" Andrea asked as the plot flickered past.

"Those are the reason for your work . . . and mine," Jeremy nodded. "They mark the locations of the great dyings."

"The *what?*" Andrea glanced away from the screen.

"Perhaps a more accurate term would be biological disruptions," Rawlings said. "There have been a series throughout the past 700 million years; short periods of time during which significant numbers of species became extinct. Some of the dyings were more far-reaching than others, but all are part of the pattern." He hit the keyboard again, and a column of numbers appeared.

634
514
443
360
240
221
136
67
35
17

"This is a summary of the known disruptions, listed in millions of years from the present," Rawlings pressed evenly. "Obviously the fossil records become less accurate the farther back in time you go, and therefore some of the dates are less firmly fixed in time, but in a way that only reinforces the

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strength of the pattern.

"The first great dying occurred some 634 million years ago, during the Precambrian period. Its victims were the primitive sea animals that were the only inhabitants of the planet. Other disruptions followed at 514, 443, and 360 million years ago. The effects of each disruption can be gauged only by the changes in the fossil record, but each can be clearly identified with a major crossroads in the evolution of life on the planet.

"The next catastrophe occurred approximately 240 million years ago, and was the most deadly that we've identified. It marks the end of the Permian period, and took with it almost 96 percent of all species of marine animals alive at that time. On land, all large reptiles were destroyed. This disruption is significant because it's the first for which we've found the location of the impact crater."

"Impact crater?" Andrea interrupted.

"In the Quebec province of Canada," Rawlings nodded before pressing forward. "Two other disruptions followed at 221 and 136 million years ago, though neither had the severity of the Permian catastrophe."

Rawlings watched the screen in silence for a moment, as if lost in his own thoughts. Suddenly he stirred and coughed, nodding again at the column of numbers.

"That brings us to the Mesozoic disruptions of 67 million years ago," he said. "This event killed nearly all life in the oceans, along with marking the end of the dinosaurs. The date of the Mesozoic catastrophe is sharply defined by unusually rich deposits of iridium in limestone laid down at this time. The best samples we've found thus far have been in the Apennines of Italy."

"And iridium," Andrea interrupted, remembering an article in one of the scientific journals, "is much more abundant in meteorites than in terrestrial rock."

"Exactly," Rawlings nodded. "By the same method, we can date another impact and resultant disruption 35 million years ago, and still another at 17 million years ago. This is the most recent catastrophe on the geologic record, and we've located a corresponding impact crater in central Germany." The display had reached its end, and he settled back in his chair, letting Andrea digest the barrage of information.

Andrea brought her hands to her face, rubbing her temples as if that would make the thinking easier. She had listened to Rawlings with growing uneasiness, increasingly certain of where his logic was leading. But still she had to give him the chance to prove her wrong, and offer another explanation for the song of the humpback whales.

"Now as to the pattern . . ." Rawlings continued. He leaned forward to tap the keyboard, and at his com-

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mand a second column of numbers appeared next to the first.

634	
514	120
443	71
360	83
240	120
221	19
136	85
67	69
35	32
17	18
0	17

"The second row of numbers is simply the difference between the preceding two numbers in the first column. Thus, 120 represents the time span in millions of years between the first known disruption at 634 million years ago, and the second at 514. Understand?"

Andrea nodded in silence as she watched the numbers.

"All right," Rawlins continued. "Now if we ask the computer to find the least common denominator among the second column of numbers, and allow it a mere 1 percent margin of adjustment for the potential error in the dating of the fossil record, we get an answer of almost exactly 17 million years. We can check the validity of the common denominator by plotting a third column of numbers, which divides each of the time intervals in column two by a factor of seventeen." Rawlings tapped the keyboard once, and a third column appeared on the screen.

634		
514	120	7.06
443	71	4.18
360	83	4.88
240	120	7.06
221	19	1.12
136	85	5.00
67	69	4.06
35	32	1.88
17	18	1.06
0	17	1.00

"This is all very interesting," she said finally, looking away from the screen. "But I've read the literature, Jeremy. The apparent regularity of meteorite falls is well known throughout the scientific community, and a lot of different people have been looking for an astronomical explanation. Gravitational conjunction of planets, or the influence of a small binary star. What does it have to do with my work?" She met his gaze for a moment, and while her tone was harsh, her eyes betrayed a momentary desperation.

Rawlings looked down at the floor, sorry to have seen the fear that Andrea couldn't hide. It was his doing, and that was something that he'd carry with him for the rest of his life. But he couldn't change the reality that had brought them both to the island, and that whispered a threat from the bright Caribbean night.

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"George Marsden spent a long time looking for an astronomical explanation that would fit the 17 million-year cycle," Rawlings answered. "But he couldn't find one. When he was convinced that he had an undeniable pattern without a convenient rational explanation, he began to explore the irrational."

Rawlings held Andrea's gaze for a long moment before he nodded toward the computer display.

"Look at the numbers, Andrea," he insisted. "Tell me the one factor we *haven't* considered in developing the importance of the 17 million-year pattern."

He lapsed into a patient silence while Andrea studied the screen, her forehead slowly furrowing at the effort.

Damn you, Jeremy . . . I'm too tired to climb through your damned hoops. Too tired . . .

Then the answer jumped from the display, exploding in her head in a wave of intuition. It wasn't the pattern of 17 million years that needed to be explained, it was the *lack* of a pattern in the intervals between the catastrophes themselves.

"Column two," she mumbled. "You haven't explained the pattern in column two."

"Exactly," Rawlings nodded. "We clearly have *something* that happens every 17 million years, but which results in a biological catastrophe on Earth only at varying times. In fact, there have been thirty-seven cycles of 17 million years covered in the fossil record, but only *ten* catastrophes during that same time period. That led Marsden to ask a dangerously simple question: *If the cycle of catastrophes wasn't readily explained by the gravitational mechanics of the heavens, might it not be tied to happenings here on Earth?"*

Rawlings reached toward the keyboard one more time, and now a new chart filled the screen.

650 ...MULTI CELLED ANIMALS
530 ...FIRST MOLLUSKS
450 ...VERTEBRATES
370 ...AMPHIBIANS
245 ...EARLY REPTILES
235 ...DINOSAURS
145 ...MARSUPIAL MAMMALS
69 ...EARLY PRIMATES
39 ...MONKEYS
17 ...APES
2 ...EARLY MAN

"This is a summary of the major epochs in the evolution of life on Earth," Rawlings explained. "It begins 650 million years ago with the first appearance of multicelled organisms in the primitive oceans, and continues up to the appearance of *Homo erectus* on the steppes of Africa 2 million years ago. Now do you see the pattern, Andrea? A major meteorite impact followed within 17 million years of *every* one of these milestones. Every one . . . except the last."

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Andrea finally stirred in her chair, coming to her feet with a sudden rush of energy. She paced across the confines of the control room, her steps clicking on the tiled floor.

"What's the point of it all, Jeremy?" she turned toward him, her face lost in the shadows. "If the impacts were meant to destroy life, the fact that we're here indicates they failed rather badly. And if someone or something wanted to dictate a course of evolution, why go about it in such a primitive way? Almost like a child . . ." Andrea stumbled into a momentary silence. "Like a child casting stones into a pond."

"Who's to say what's primitive, and what's the ultimate efficiency?" Rawlings shook his head slowly. "What if the intent was not to destroy life, but merely to prevent the rise to dominance of an undesirable life-form? If you accept that premise, then perhaps it all becomes a wonder of efficiency. *Think* of it, Andrea. With the minimum expenditure of effort, something may have intentionally eradicated tens of thousands of species, while leaving the incubator perfectly intact. David himself did no better when he killed Goliath." He paused, wishing that she would come out of the shadows.

"At least, that is Marsden's conjecture," he continued. "And while we have a lot of interesting circumstantial evidence, we're lacking the one factor that would make it undeniable."

Andrea closed her eyes, feeling the circle of logic tighten inside her head. The words came out of her mouth mechanically, as if the strings were being pulled by an unseen hand.

"A witness," she whispered.

"A witness," Rawlings echoed. "And that's where you came in. When the last great catastrophe occurred 17 million years ago, our ancestors were barely apes, but the whales were already an ancient species. Perhaps it's a long shot, but they are the only living creatures who might still retain some memory of what happened, and pass that memory on to us. It was a chance we had to take."

Of course, and that's why you couldn't tell me the truth at the beginning. You knew I wouldn't have believed you, Jeremy. You knew . . .

"Why did you need the answer so quickly?" she asked finally, her voice still an empty reflection. "Even if everything you say is true, what difference does it make? Even if our evolution wasn't purely random, we're still human, aren't we?"

"I suppose we are," Rawlings nodded. "But what if Michelangelo was wrong, Andrea? What if it's not the face of God we see reflected back in our shaving mirrors? And what will we say when they come to cast the stones one more time?

"Marsden thinks our season of supremacy may already be running out. He's found an anomaly in the orbit of the asteroid Eros, which under nor-

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mal circumstances can pass within 20 million miles of Earth. If that anomaly is connected with everything we've been discussing, then Marsden believes that the next catastrophe will come before the end of this century. And if that's the fate awaiting us, we need the evidence, Andrea. Evidence to convince a fractured world that it's time we start working together, and prove we *deserve* to survive."

Rawlings fell silent, watching the shadows where Andrea remained like an uncertain ghost. Just when he had given up hope of making her believe, she stepped forward, her eyes glazed as she stumbled back to her seat by the console. Her hands moved stiffly over the keyboard as she summoned up the results of her past few days of work.

"Here is your evidence," she rasped, the words barely escaping a throat that was tight and dry with fear. She pulled her hands away from the terminal, wrapping her arms around her shoulders as she fought back a shiver.

The screen danced before her eyes, flowing with the frequency plots of the ancient song the whales had offered to the helicopters. Rawlings leaned close to the display, watching the patterns blossom in phosphorescent green.

"But what does it mean?" he asked impatiently.

Andrea swallowed hard, fighting at the knot that threatened to climb up from her stomach. Then she read the words as the computer offered them up in translation, her voice thin and distant as she drifted back to the nightly ritual of her own childhood.

"Lords of the Sky," she prayed. *"Let us live . . ."*

Coming soon

Next month: "Spirits from the Vasty Deep," a new fantasy about the wizard Kedrigern by **John Morressy**; "Glory" the Hollywood story by **Ron Goulart** that was forced out of this issue, **Richard Cowper's** "Test Case," and **Harlan Ellison's** follow up to the October column, which arrived just too late to make this issue.

Soon: new stories by **David Brin, Kate Wilhelm, Thomas M. Disch, Bob Leman, Kim Stanley Robison, Andrew Greeley, Lisa Tuttle** and many others. Use the coupon on page 162 to enter your own subscription or to send a holiday gift.

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THE UNMENTIONABLE PLANET

Back in the 1950's, I wrote a series of six adventure books for young readers featuring a young man named Lucky Starr. Each book was set in a different portion of the Solar system. In order, the settings were Mars, the asteroids, Venus, Mercury, Jupiter and Saturn. A seventh book (never written) was to be set on Pluto. I don't think I ever considered using Uranus as a setting, however.

Uranus seems to be the least regarded of the planets. Every other planet has something remarkable about it that makes it a logical setting for science fiction stories. Mercury is the closest to the Sun, Venus is the closest to the Earth, Mars is the best known, Jupiter is the largest, Saturn has its rings, Neptune is the farthest giant; Pluto is the farthest planetary object of any size that can be observed throughout its orbit.

But Uranus? What about Uranus? Is it neglected only because it has nothing remarkable about it? Surely not! I think that, in part, it is because it has the handicap of an unfortunate name, one that, in the English language, at least, is all but unmentionable.

I learned this the hard way. In my young and carefree days, I knew that Uranus (more properly, Ouranos) was the Greek god of the sky. I knew that the muse of astronomy was,

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therefore, Urania (you-RAY-nee-uh). I also knew that there was an element that had, upon its discovery, been named "uranium" for the then newly-discovered planet Uranus, and that this was pronounced "yoo-RAY-nee-um."

It seemed to me obvious, therefore, that the name of the planet was pronounced "yoo-RAY-nus" and it was in this way that I pronounced it. So sure was I, that I never bothered to check the dictionary. Not once, moreover, was I wise enough to notice that the name of the planet, so pronounced, was homonymous with "your anus."

The time came, however, when someone pronounced it with the accent on the first syllable. I at once corrected him, with my usual insufferable air of superiority; in the argument that followed, we referred to the dictionary and, to my horror, I lost. The victor, dissatisfied with mere victory, squashed me flat by informing me of the distasteful nature of my pronunciation.

As it happens, though, Uranus (pronounced "YOO-rih-nus") isn't much better, for it is then homonymous with "urinous," meaning "to have the appearance, properties, or odor of urine."

The result is that the two possible alternate pronunciations of the planet's name are each unpalatable in English, and so people avoid mentioning the planet. I know the solution, of course, Either the Greek version of the name, Ouranos (pronounced "OO-rih-nus"), can be adopted, or else the word can be pronounced with a short "a" (Yoo-RAN-us). Since these suggestions are sensible ones, they will never be adopted.

In early 1986, however, Uranus was much in the news, and people had to say its name. So now, with that in mind, I will deal with the planet. I had discussed it earlier in THE COMET THAT WASN'T (November 1976) and RINGS AND THINGS (August 1978), but everything prior to January 1986 is ancient history, now, as far as Uranus is concerned.

In 1977, two probes, Voyager 1 and Voyager 2, were launched and sent toward Jupiter and Saturn in order to study those giant planets. They passed Jupiter in 1979 and Saturn in 1980 and performed well. After that, Voyager 1 moved out of the planetary plane and wandered off indefinitely through the spatial abyss.

Voyager 2, however, was re-directed in its flight so that it might pass close to the still farther planets, Uranus and Neptune. What's more, the

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devices it carried were punched up in a series of clever moves so that when it should finally reach Uranus it would be better equipped to study the planet than it would have been in its freshly-launched state in 1977.

Uranus is distinctly smaller than Jupiter or Saturn. Uranus's diameter of 51,000 kilometers (32,000 miles) is only about 3/7 that of Saturn and about 1/3 that of Jupiter. It is, nevertheless, 6½ times that of Earth, so it is still a "gas giant." Looking at it another way, Uranus has 2/13 the mass of Saturn and 1/22 the mass of Jupiter, but it has 14½ times the mass of Earth.

Most planets have axes of rotation that are more or less at right angles to its orbital plane about the Sun. In other words, if we look at the planet in the sky, its axis of rotation is close to being up and down. There is usually a small tilt. Venus and Jupiter have axes that are 3 degrees from the upright; Earth has a tilt of 23.5 degrees; Mars, one of 24 degrees; Saturn, nearly 27 degrees; Neptune, nearly 29 degrees. Mercury's axial inclination is uncertain, but it is something less than 28 degrees.

Presumably, if the planetary system had formed from a vast cloud of dust and gas, swirling about in eddies and sub-eddies, all the planetary axes should have been exactly perpendicular to the plane of the orbit about the Sun.

The planets were formed, however, by the coming together of sub-planetary objects. If those objects came together from all directions equally, then the axis would remain at a perpendicular. However, it is likely that the directions of the later and larger slams were not equally balanced, so that the axis would be somewhat knocked out of true by a random amount.

Well, Uranus must have received one or more terrific knocks while it was forming and, as luck would have it, from more or less the same direction, for its axis is tilted by a colossal 98 degrees — a little more than a right angle.

This means that Uranus is rotating about its axis on its side, and in viewing the planet in the sky, we see the axis extend from left to right rather than up and down.

Uranus revolves about the Sun in 84 years, and, because of the tipping of its axis, the northern hemisphere sees the Sun spiraling up to zenith and then down to the horizon during half the revolution, while the southern hemisphere sees that happen during the other half.

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If one were at Uranus's north pole (or south pole) one would see the Sun rise at some point on the horizon, then slowly ascend the vault of the sky until, after some 21 years (!) it would be nearly overhead. It would then descend for another 21 years, finally setting at the opposite point on the horizon after having remained in the sky for 42 years. It would then be 42 years more before it rises again.

A human being born at one of Uranus's poles at birth would be a middle-aged man at sunset and a very old man before it was time for a second sunrise.

At the present moment, in the skies of Uranus, the Sun is nearly at zenith over the planet's south pole. In other words, the south pole is pointing nearly directly toward the Earth and Sun. (It has to point at both, for, from Uranus, the Earth is never seen farther than 3 degrees from the Sun.)

As 1985 drew to its close, Voyager 2 was approaching Uranus and getting ready to take its photographs and make its measurements. It had traveled about 10½ billion kilometers (6½ billion miles) to do this. (Uranus is only 2¾ billion kilometers, — 1 2/3 billion miles from us as the crow flies — but Voyager 2 was not flying in a straight line, but in wide arcs in response to the gravitational pull of the Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn, and to the original motion of the Earth at the time of launch.)

Having come all that way, Voyager 2 found itself in dim surroundings. The intensity of light from Uranus's very distant Sun is ¼ that at Saturn, 1/13 that at Jupiter, and 1/368 that at Earth. This means that photographs at Uranus had to be of longer exposure than those taken at Jupiter and Saturn. At Saturn, exposures of 15 seconds were sufficient, but at Uranus exposures of nearly 100 seconds were needed. This means there was time for fewer photographs and that there was a greater chance of fuzziness.

In appearance, Uranus was bluish and nearly featureless. This was not entirely unexpected. The farther from the Sun, the less heat is delivered to the planet and the smaller is the difference in temperature between the various parts of the planetary surface. It is the temperature difference that drives the atmospheric circulation and produces visible clouds and storms.

Hence, Jupiter's atmosphere is banded and tortured, Saturn's is less so, and Uranus's is virtually quiet.

Furthermore, various gases are frozen out of the atmosphere as one recedes from the Sun. Jupiter's atmosphere is comparatively rich in am-

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monia, plus other gases with comparatively high boiling points, and it is these which help form the clouds and colored formations. On Saturn, the ammonia is lower in the atmosphere (where the temperature rises to the point of keeping it gaseous) and on Uranus, lower still.

This means that on Uranus, methane, which has a particularly low boiling point, is the predominant impurity in the upper atmosphere. Methane absorbs red light and gives the atmosphere a blue appearance. Furthermore, methane tends to undergo chemical reactions in the presence of even the feeble sunlight that bathes that distant planet. This produces a hydrocarbon smog that keeps us from seeing far into the planetary atmosphere. (It is this same sort of smog that exists in the methane-rich atmosphere of Saturn's moon, Titan.)

The chemical reaction undergone by methane may make itself evident in a change in color in the atmosphere. If so, that change would be most noticeable at the south pole now, where the feeble Sun at zenith delivers slightly more heat than elsewhere; and, indeed, a trifling increase in redness has been reported at the south pole.

Of course, methane is present in the Uranian atmosphere only as a minor component. The chief components (as in the case of Jupiter, Saturn and, for that matter, the Sun) are hydrogen and helium with hydrogen predominant.

Recent infra-red studies from Earth's surface seemed to show that the Uranian atmosphere might be as much as 40 percent helium. This sent a shudder of dismay through the astronomic fraternity, since the figure is far too high. The helium content of the Universe, generally, is 25 percent by mass, with hydrogen making up the remaining 75 percent (and everything else being less than 1 percent).

The Sun, Jupiter, and Saturn have helium contents of 25 percent or less, and it would be a chore indeed to account for the accumulation of helium on Uranus.

One might argue that Uranus being farther from the Sun would have less material out of which to form. It would therefore develop more slowly, and be smaller than Saturn (which is in turn smaller than Jupiter). Because Uranus would be smaller than the two inner gas giants at every stage of its formation, it would have a less intense gravitational field and would gather less hydrogen than Jupiter and Saturn. It might manage to gather the more massive atoms of helium efficiently, however, and in this way it would accumulate not more helium, but at least a higher percentage of it.

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The trouble with that notion is that Uranus is colder than either Jupiter or Saturn, and, at its lower temperature, it should be able to hold on to hydrogen easily despite its smaller size.

To the infinite relief of astronomers, however, Voyager 2 eliminated the problem. Its observations showed the helium content of Uranus's atmosphere to be about 12 to 15 percent — exactly where it ought to be.

A total of four clouds, fairly deep in the atmosphere, were detected, and they were studied carefully in order to determine the rotation period of the planet.

There was a general feeling among astronomers that the smaller the planet, the longer the rotational period. Thus Jupiter, the largest planet, rotates in 9.84 hours; Saturn, the next largest, in 10.23 hours; and Earth, in 24 hours. Uranus, lying between Saturn and Earth in size, ought to have an intermediate rotation period, too.

The usually accepted period of rotation for Uranus, until recently, was 10.8 hours. In 1977, however, a new measurement yielded a rotational period of perhaps as much as 25 hours.

The trouble was, of course, that there was no clear marking on Uranus that could be seen from Earth and followed in its travels. Voyager 2, however, presented results that showed that Uranus rotates on its axis in 17.24 hours, which is certainly an acceptable figure.

There are some puzzles about the atmosphere, of course. The temperature at the visible surface of the Uranian atmosphere is about the same everywhere. The weak solar radiation doesn't seem to make much difference. There is, however, a region at about 30 degrees north latitude and south latitude where the temperature seems to drop a small bit. No acceptable reason has yet been presented for this.

Then, too, winds have been detected in the atmosphere which travel at about a hundred miles an hour in the direction of the planetary rotation. This is puzzling, because what we know of atmospheric motions leads us to suppose that the wind should blow in the direction opposite to that of the planetary rotation. However, Uranus (like Jupiter and Saturn) seems to radiate more energy than it receives from the Sun, so there must be some internal source of heat, some physical or chemical change, that may possibly account for the anomalous wind movement.

As Voyager 2 approached Uranus, it seemed at first that Uranus had

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no magnetic field. This was a major shock, for one expected a field if a planet had a rapid rotation and an electrically conductive interior. Since Jupiter and Saturn have magnetic fields, it seemed certain Uranus would have one. If Uranus lacked one, that would call for some tall explaining.

Fortunately, astronomers were rescued. Voyager 2 was approaching from the sunside, and the observation of the magnetic field was blocked by electrons in Uranus's ionosphere. When Voyager 2 reached a point 470,000 kilometers (290,000 miles) from Uranus's center, they passed into the planetary magnetosphere. The magnetic field existed; it was 50 times as strong as Earth's, and it stretched way out on the night side. All was as it should be.

Well, not quite all. The magnetic axis is usually tipped with respect to the rotational axis, and the magnetic axis does not necessarily pass through the gravitational center of the planet. (No satisfactory explanation for this has yet been reached.)

The situation in Uranus's case is extreme, however. The magnetic axis is tipped no less than 60 degrees to the rotational axis, and the center of the magnetic axis is 8000 kilometers (5000 miles) from the center of the planet. Why this extraordinary displacement should be we don't know, but perhaps it has something to do with the just as extraordinary tipping of the rotational axis.

Voyager 2 passed between the planet's rings and Miranda, its innermost satellite (as observed from Earth). At 5 P.M. on January 24, 1986, it made its closest approach to Miranda, reaching a point 28,000 kilometers (17,400 miles) from Miranda's surface. Not quite an hour later it made its closest approach to Uranus, when it reached a point 81,500 kilometers (51,000 miles) from Uranus's cloud layer. It made these close passes within seconds of the scheduled time and only 16 kilometers (10 miles) from the scheduled path. That was pin-pointing with a vengeance.

Nine thin rings had been detected around Uranus in 1977 by studies from the Earth's surface. This was done by studying Uranus when it passed very close to a star and noting the way in which starlight blinked on and off as the rings passed before it.

Voyager 2 showed the nine rings were really there and detected a tenth ring between the eighth and ninth, as one counts outward from Uranus. The new ring is very thin and faint and could not possibly have been spotted from Earth.

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As was observed even from Earthside observations, Uranus's rings are composed of dark particles. This is, perhaps, no mystery. The smaller bodies in the outer Solar system tend to be icy, where the ice (usually water ice, but perhaps with ammonia and methane as minor components) is mixed with stony materials of various sizes.

Two things can happen to such icy objects that would serve to darken them. They can slowly lose ice through evaporation while not losing the stony materials. With time, through billions of years, small objects become less icy and tend to become covered with a crust of stony material that is darker than the ice and that prevents further ice from evaporating. Secondly, the methane in the ice may slowly polymerize into black, tarry substances that will further darken the surface.

The possible development of such a crust on comets was mentioned by me in THE MINOR OBJECTS (May 1986), and this was written well before Giotto skimmed past Comet Halley. When Giotto made its pass, it showed that Comet Halley was very black in color. (It was still sending out jets of evaporating ice, however, for it was heated far more intensely here in the inner Solar system than objects in the neighborhood of Uranus would be.)

The problem, then, is not why Uranus's rings are so dark, but why Saturn's rings are so white. Apparently the small bodies near Saturn (with the exception of the satellite, Iapetus, which seems to be darkened over one hemisphere) are icier than those near either Jupiter or Uranus, and this will some day have to be explained.

Again, it turns out that whereas Saturn's rings are composed of particles of all sizes, from fine dust to what are almost mountains, Uranus's rings are composed of objects that are comparatively uniformly boulder size. Uranus's rings are virtually dust free. This is again an unexplained difference between Saturn and Uranus, and it is my guess that it will be Saturn that will turn out to be atypical.

Uranus has a satellite system that is peculiar in several ways. Five satellites were discovered from Earth observations, and of these five, none are giant satellites with diameters of 3000 kilometers (1850 miles) or more. Uranus is the only gas giant without a giant satellite. Neptune has Triton, Saturn has Titan, and Jupiter has Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. Even the Earth has the Moon. Why Uranus should lack a giant satellite we don't know. Can it have something to do with Uranus's extraordinary axial tip?

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The five satellites are as tipped as Uranus, by the way, and revolve in Uranus's equatorial plane. That means that while all other planetary satellites move more or less left, right, left, right as we watch them in the sky, the Uranian satellites move up, down, up, down.

This may mean that the satellites were formed after Uranus's axis was tipped. If Uranus had had a relatively un-tipped axis with the satellites in place in its then equatorial plane, the tipping of Uranus would have left the satellites moving in highly inclined orbits. The tipping must have taken place very early in the history of the Solar system and the satellites came into being afterward.

The satellites are darker than expected. They could not be made out as anything but dots of light from Earth, so astronomers judged their size from their brightness, assuming a moderately high ability to reflect light, since they were thought to be icy. Since they proved darker than had been thought, they must reflect less light and must be larger in order to be as bright as they appear. Here is a list of the diameters of the five satellites, as they were thought to be before Voyager 2 and as they are known to be now:

Satellite	Diameter kilometers (miles)	
	before Voyager 2	after Voyager 2
Miranda	240 (150)	480 (300)
Ariel	700 (435)	1170 (725)
Umbriel	500 (310)	1190 (740)
Titania	1000 (620)	1590 (990)
Oberon	900 (560)	1550 (965)

Notice that Miranda's diameter has been increased 2.0 times, Ariel 1.7 times, Umbriel 2.4 times, Titania 1.6 times and Oberon 1.7 times. Naturally, the satellites were discovered in order of decreasing size. Miranda, the smallest of the five (and the innermost), was not discovered till 1948.

On December 31, 1985, however, the approaching Voyager 2 discovered a sixth satellite, one that was closer to Uranus than Miranda is. Miranda is 130,000 kilometers (80,400 miles) from Uranus's center, whereas the new satellite is only 85,000 kilometers (53,400 miles) away. The new satellite is also only 160 kilometers (100 miles) in

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diameter. Its provisional name is 1985U1.

In January 1986, no fewer than nine more satellites were discovered, all closer to Uranus than 1985U1. The first three discovered, 1986U1, 1986U2, and 1986U3, were about 80 kilometers (50 miles) across, the rest between 20 and 50 kilometers (10 and 30 miles) across. The innermost now known is 1986U7, which is only 50,000 kilometers (30,500 miles) from Uranus and is within the ring system.

These small satellites introduce a couple of problems. The study of Jupiter and Saturn by probe introduced the notion of "shepherd satellites," small satellites that circle on the outside and inside of a particular ring and, by gravitational influence, keep the rings from spreading out and dissipating. Well, most of Uranus's rings do not seem to have such satellites. How, then, do they stay in existence?

Then, too, we find that Jupiter, Saturn and Uranus all have small satellites circling in or just outside the ring system. Neptune probably has them, too. Mercury and Venus have no satellites at all, and Earth has a large, distant Moon, but no small satellites close in. Is it the absence of these small close-in satellites that keeps these worlds from retaining rings? Mars does have two small satellites close-in, but no ring. Were the Martian satellites captured after a ring had dissipated? We're going to have to learn a lot more about ring formation, if we can.

The five comparatively large satellites of Uranus were examined. Oberon has a cratered surface, with bright rays spreading outward from them. That's common enough. The crater floors are dark, however, and that's less common.

Titania has not only craters, but rift valleys. Let's skip Umbriel for the moment and pass on to Ariel, which has even larger rifts and canyons. Apparently, the closer to Uranus, the more tortured the satellite surface.

Miranda, which was seen at closest quarters, was a huge surprise. Its super-tortured surface had a little bit of everything. It had canyons like Mars, grooves like Ganymede, sunken terrains like Mercury. In addition it had a series of dark lines, like a stack of pancakes edge-on; a set of grooves marked out like a racetrack, and a bright V-shaped chevron.

It seemed utterly confusing to have so small a body have such a variety of surface features. It is far too small to be geologically alive. The current speculation is that it suffered near-death. It was struck by some large body, perhaps, and actually shattered. (Saturn's innermost sizable

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satellite, Mimas, has a crater so large that the impact must have nearly shattered it.)

The shattered Miranda must have come together again under its own gravity, but not in an orderly fashion. It came together every which way and now presents its surface in the chaotic fashion it does.

• • •

It seems to me that the real mystery, however, is Umbriel. It is the darkest of the satellites. It is also apparently featureless except for one bright ring, like a doughnut shining near the edge of the lighted hemisphere.

Why is Umbriel darker than the rest? Why is it featureless? What produces the white doughnut? Unfortunately, it will probably be many years before we get another (and, perhaps, better) look at Umbriel, and till then we can only stare at the pictures we have and wonder.

In 1787, the German-English astronomer William Herschel (1738-1822), who had discovered Uranus itself six years before, discovered its two brightest satellites. Instead of naming them after Graeco-Roman mythological characters, he called them "Oberon" and "Titania," the King and Queen of fairies in William Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

When the English astronomer William Lassell (1799-1880 discovered the third and fourth brightest satellites of Uranus in 1851, he named the brighter of the two "Ariel" after the happy, light-hearted spirit in Shakespeare's "The Tempest." (It was naturally assumed that Ariel, the brighter, was also larger than the other, but we now know that the other is really larger, but darker, so that it reflects less light.)

The other, dimmer satellite, Lassell named "Umbriel" after a spirit in "The Rape of the Lock," a mock epic written by the English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Umbriel was a moody spirit, full of sighs and melancholy. He was named "Umbriel" from the Latin word for "shadow." (Thus, an "umbrella" casts a "liittle shadow" within which we remain dry.)

When the fifth satellite of Uranus was discovered by the Dutch-American astronomer Gerard Peter Kuiper (1905-1973), he went back to "The Tempest" and named the newly discovered object Miranda, after the play's charming heroine.

But isn't it strange that the dark, shadowy satellite, Umbriel, should be named for a moody spirit that sat glumly in the shadows? Is there some deep significance here?

No! Not at all. It's just coincidence.

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Russell Griffin ("The Road King," February 1986) presents us with a dark satire about a mission to a truly alien world and asks us to consider: Who is the primitive?

The Place of Turnings

BY
RUSSELL GRIFFIN

Mine is a world of mazes.

Oh, small and humble, I admit, but consider the view from the portico outside. I cannot see it, but I remember from the late king my father's time — tiled roofs blinding in the sunlight, spiraling tier on tier up the sides of the crater almost to the grassy rim.

From your ship this morning, you must have seen those roofs in patterned whorls, more intricate than the Place of Turnings because they are unplanned, weaving in and out and around and down until, as you swooped closer, they dissolved into confusion. Nod if it is not so. Please, you know I cannot look in any direction more than a moment. Yes, thank you, I thought as much. The closer one gets to anything, the more incomprehensible it becomes.

And mine is a world as well of the most exquisite introspection.

Consider, please, the poor man whose fondest possession, a flowering euryale, inadvertently shades some shoots of blue perseis in his wealthy neighbor's garden so they wither and die. The neighbor, of course, is too polite to mention it. The man's conscience drives him to apologize, but at his neighbor's gate, he wonders if he may be apologizing not because he regrets the loss of such exquisite beauty, but because he hopes to profit from his rich neighbor's good opinion.

Of course, that good opinion might save him from starvation, but he does not wish to believe his motivations so crass. So to avoid the appearance of crassness, he must give the appearance of insensitivity: when his neighbor comes to the gate, he turns on his heel and goes home.

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Please, do not be impatient. I am coming to the point. Of course we appreciate how far you've come and how you have cared for us like your children. Of course we all remember how obedient and quick to please was the late king my father, who was blessed in finding favor with those who came before you. And yes, they, too, pointed out how many great ships your fathers-of-fathers could send to circle our poor world—though perhaps another time we might discuss how you need so many to rule there, whereas here I alone am sufficient.

(Tetagi, more wine for our guests—no, a thousand pardons, good fellow, the other kilkerkin now. And another dram of torone for me. I grow restless.)

And if I may be allowed the liberty, your colleagues were just this impatient with the intricacies of polite discourse.

Forgive me. Too often I forget you were not trained to patience from childhood as I was. Each prince here must learn to live hedged in by ceremonious etiquette. A small price to preserve the delicate equipoise of the Galaxy, don't you agree? Your fathers-of-fathers would, I'm sure. The torone helps, of course.

Oh yes, they were here — your colleagues, I mean. My humblest apologies that was not made clear before.

I remember them quite well—four altogether. An exobiologist, a taxonomist, an ecoengineer, and a stratigrapher. They sat where you are, facing the murals of the outer wall. (Lovely, are they not? Creteia, the Great Dark and Father-of-All, politely refusing his son's pleadings, who must later slay him and rise as the sun to shed the light of Creation's first morning, painted in the late king my father's time.) And I studied the angle of their spines and the set of their shoulders in the dimness, as I have learned to do, for in the eyes lives the power.

"We go-im all over," their leader said in his thin voice. Cromlech was his name, the taxonomist; a delightful man, of course, but, dare I say, perhaps the least bit too particular? His head was cropped so close I could discern the delicate suffusions of blood across the back of his neck and lower skull that accompanied each wave of emotion. "Me numpa-one collector, make-im listee, count-im numpa alla-kind bigfela smolfela beastie you got."

"A census of our animal species?" I said. "How useful — as long as custom is observed."

"So we've been doing aerial mapping and tracegrams — uh, I mean, got-im machine go looky-looky in bigfela jungle-garden next crater—"

I could hear the sharp breaths from the servants, but I held up my hand. To criticize a guest is, well, one of four levels between incivility and solecism for which you have no ade-

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quate equivalents. "You've been mapping the Place of Turnings?" I asked.

"You keep-im beastie no can find anywhere else, real how-say rare."

"Since time immemorial we have cultivated in the Place of Turnings all creatures that preceded us, by hedging them in with cultivation," I explained. "Long ago we learned that balance is the supreme law of the universe. You have a metaphor for it, I am told — the bell-shaped curve. (Such a colorful and evocative phrase, for bells are exquisite in shape as well as sound, are they not?) The more civilized we become at one end, the more we must preserve the counterweight of wild and savage things on the other. The King's Beasts, they are called, because by tradition only the king may enter there."

"But the tracegrams — I mean, um, look-see tell-im us one beastie in bigfela trouble." His voice became tense and anxious. "Got-im no godfela man, no godfela marri."

My throat constricted. "A creature with no mate?" I risked the back of his head a moment, then glanced toward Tetagi. "Alive?"

"As of this morning, big-fela king. Hazelton here ran the traces from orbit before we shuttled down. Taboo there, yes? So no can be-im one of your people, cause them no can go-im in."

"Do you have any idea what . . . species of creature?"

"What *kind* him be?" Cromlech glanced at the others.

"Shaped like . . . one of us?" I persisted.

I could see the muscles at the back of his head knot as he clenched his jaw and hunched farther forward.

"Possibly, to the untrained eye," said his number two, the exobiologist Hazelton. "We haven't actually seen it ourselves."

My fingers trembled as I closed them around the dram Tetagi held out to me, fearing for Creation until the torone had burned its sweet way down and begun to spread its numbness. "You were right, old friend," I whispered sadly to him.

"Anyway, Cromlech continued, "him only one that-kind beastie alive, gotta get-im look sees." With his hands he pantomimed the square shape of the mechanical image records they were forever making with their devices.

"Enter the Place of Turnings yourselves?"

"This numpa-one scientific emergency," Cromlech said, almost turning to face me. "Got to get-im solid proof chop-chop before thing die-im, or might as well never exist-im at all. That science. You got-im some god we make sacrifice to?"

"One cannot buy off Decorum." I weighed the evils, but I knew what I had to do. "There is a way," I said at last.

"You mustn't, Majesty," whispered Tetagi. "I know it's he. I know he's survived."

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"The burden would be mine even if the fault were not. You warned me it had to be done by the letter of Decorum or it would come to nothing." I turned to Cromlech. "The uninitiated may enter the Place of Turnings at the hem of the king."

Cromlech seemed unhappy, as though he feared I might interfere. "Me hear-im it taboo for kingfela go-im outside kingfela house."

"After dark, when the palace twilight has spread out over the world, the king may venture from his throne," I said. "But only into the Place of Turnings, where Creation's lines of force are so weak and disordered they can be disturbed without fear. There I will lead you to—"

I could not speak the word that was him. I dismissed them all and ordered more torone. Then I waited until the sun should set.

At dusk, Tetagi brought my palanquin, and my blind hoodsmen lifted me in lest my feet touch the ground. A moment later, Tetagi's withered hand parted a side curtain.

"A thousand pardons," he whispered. "I beg permission to share the danger with you, Lord."

"You of all people violate Decorum?" I said.

"I am an old man who should have advised you better. My usefulness is over."

"I could not bear to lose you," I said. "Only a fool would exchange the good services you still have in you, for help this one night. Stay."

"I weep for you," he sighed, "but in pride as well as sorrow." One hand thrust in the fat coil of ribbon, the other the Gift of Kings. I stared at it, resolution dwindling.

"Only the ribbon," I pleaded.

"Would you stumble from the path again?" he asked. "The old ways are still best, no matter what he told you —and kinder, if indeed he lives."

Whose advice would I trust more? It is old Tetagi who brought me into this world. It is he who cuts my hair and nails while I sleep so they may be considered stolen, to spare me desecrating my own holy excrescences.

I accepted the Gift into my sleeve-bag, its coldness sharp against my skin. Then I gave the command to go. With infinite care not to jostle Creation, my bearers raised the palanquin and carried me through the great hall to the outside where your colleagues waited, weighed down with heavy packs and strange equipage.

At once I was struck by smells I had not known for so long, pungent aromas I'd taken for granted in my princehood. I was tempted to halt and savor them, but Decorum drove me on.

"It okay-dokay take-im some specimen in Place of Turnings?" Cromlech's voice asked casually from outside the curtain. "You know, sample kingfela beastie?"

Luckily the torone was still strong. "As you will," I said, and my voice

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seemed calm. "You are guests."

We moved on, to the creaks of the palanquin springing ever so lightly on its poles as we began to climb the streets of the crater slope.

"Why, um, taboo for king go-im outdoors in daytime?" Cromlech began.

"The king's throne is the center of a web of power, and the king's every move, like the shiver of a spider's footfall, is felt along each line of force to its farthest anchorpoint."

"We got-im spider-kind thing in our world," he observed. "Forty thousand araneomorphae, and counting mygalomorphs —" He hesitated, embarrassed. "Uh, lotsa numpa spider."

"My every act has a consequence," I continued. "If I wear knots in my clothing, a mother in travail may be unable to deliver because her birth canal is constricted."

"So you take-im how-say sedative to keep-im still," he said.

"The torone, yes," I said.

"But howcum world no die-im same time bigfela-king your father die-im?" I fancied a smile of condescension in his voice.

"It would have," I answered, "if it weren't for Decorum."

A thousand pardons, Tetagi. Honored guests, propriety requires I let my retainers retire. The hour is late. Would any of you like more wine before they go? Fill their glasses anyway, Tetagi, and another dram for me. And then good night, old friend.

Where was I? Oh, yes, I told Cromlech how in ancient days, when a king's health began to fail, his heir had to enter the palace and . . . but it is death to know the ending of a king. Suffice to say when his earth-time comes, his life-power must pass directly to his successor before it can break from his clouding eyes and wreak havoc across Creation. My father sought what he conceived to be alternatives kinder and better suited to these times of change since your people came. And so once, I fear, did I.

Even this makes you shift with discomfort? I understand — one must be born to our convictions. Yet that night I still was insecure enough to need to convince unbelievers. I cracked the curtain at the front to look over the shoulders of my bearers and the rooftops beyond into the sky itself. "Look, just above the horns of that tallest euryale on the rim," I said to Cromlech, freeing my thoughts to focus through the line of force from my eyes to that point. Out they shot through the clinging clouds, the thinning air, and were gone.

Nothing. I bit my lip. For the barest moment I began to fear that the late king my father had been right, but I tried again, squeezing my eyelids shut. Again nothing. Then when I was about to despair — a flash (a hair to one side of where I thought I had struck, but what of that?) — followed by a downward arcing eyelash of light.

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I know it seems miraculous to you, but a king never lies, and his sight is always clear. I had expected Cromlech, who actually witnessed my puissance, to say something, but I had to prompt him.

"That shooting star?" he said. "What about it?"

"My eyes shook it from the firmament."

"Planet go-im through meteor cloud now, same-time every year," he said. "Science tell-im that. Look-im numpa-two, there. You do-im that, too?"

By chance a second star was arcing down. What can I say? Logic cannot make the blind man see. I shrugged and leaned back, feeling the angle of ascent lessening, and suddenly my curtain rings rattled as my hoodsmen tightened them lest at the crest I should inadvertently gaze upon the sea and boil it away.

Never to look upon the ocean—sometimes that seems the heaviest burden of all. How I remember my nurse taking me down to the shore, the damp press of the breeze, the incoming shove and departing tug of each wave, the treacherous sand running out from beneath my feet. How I would lie in the hissing beach grass and watch the hard, flat sea feather into the black storm clouds as they came dipping down, driving the screeching seabirds before them.

I could not appreciate then why when Nurse brought me home, the king my father would sit me where you are, to tell him how the stormy water would wap and wan, and the seafowl wheel. Ah, the pity I might have felt had I but understood. But on balance, perhaps I was blessed in then being equally ignorant of his error in faulting Decorum. And of the even graver errors he would fall into.

Then the palanquin dipped forward as we descended into the next crater. I often wonder whether the Place of Turnings grew naturally out of the ruins of Creteia's palace or was planned from its first seedling. It is too long ago to know. Being too far away can make a thing as incomprehensible as being too close.

Now we could hear the distant growls and mournful wails of the King's Beasts. And the ears of one who knew might also pick out the metallic *chinks* of the gardeners at work.

Cromlech grew more uneasy. "Where him bigfela gate?"

"I am looking for it," I said.

"You forget-im where him be?"

"It is never in the same place twice."

The gardeners had seen us now. I caught glimpses of them as they dropped to their knees facing away, and I held up my hand in unseen blessing.

"Every night while the equipoise is locked," I continued, "these gardeners replant the outer layers."

"Why.?"

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"To keep the King's Beasts from finding the way out."

"Why not put-im bars on gate?"

"But Decorum requires them to be free to come and go," I said. "If because of its windings the Place of Turnings confines the King's Beasts to its heart, then it is Chance that imprisons them, not we."

"Then bigfela-king only real prisoner," he said.

I did not answer, concentrating instead on how punky the air felt before my thoughts a thousand paces ahead. Perhaps there was some kind of interference, or perhaps I had not yet had the practice of my predecessors, but at last I had to grant a gardener the privilege of leading us, and in a few moments his heart was gladdened to show my bearers where to set the palanquin gently down.

My hoodsmen pulled back the hedge-side curtains. With the briefest glance I caught the mass of thick gray leaves lapping one over the other like armor scales amongst dense constellations of new leaflets. A little beyond was a low arch grown about with freshly planted bush and bramble, little more than a puncture in the leafy wall, a peephole hardly big enough for a man to pass through. I shivered.

"That's the entrance?" Cromlech asked incredulously.

"It exists for the king's need," I answered. "Not to ease the way of others."

I swung my legs out the open side and slipped my toes among the wet and rubbery leaves to touch just inside the opening. Then I thrust myself away with both hands. My knees nearly buckled under the unaccustomed weight, but I steadied myself by grabbing a branch overhead and straightened my trembling legs.

I was standing! Do not think I fault tradition, too, but I cannot deny it was a sensation so long forgotten it seemed new, like being born again. For however short a time, I was free as any of my subjects. I took one stiff step, the ground deliciously springy beneath my sole, then a second. But I mastered the temptation to forget why I had come. I tied one end of the ribbon to a thick leaf stem, shaking cold dew down from the interlace of branches overhead. It soaked my shoulders.

Then I felt something watching from the emptiness behind the leaves. I turned, but at that instant Cromlech came crashing through behind the pole of light from his helmet, bent double under a pack bristling with lashes of tubes, and the something flitted back into the darkness. Cromlech was startled I hadn't turned away.

"In this chaos the Decorum is lifted," I explained. "But please, no light. You will frighten my beasts."

He muttered angrily and turned off his helmet.

I stared into the column of dark-

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ness. It was necessary to remember that in the Place of Turnings the true way would never be the obvious one. Just visible halfway down yawned the mouth of a branching gallery. Cromlech asked Hazelton if she could get a reading for them to follow, but she shook her head, her face lit a strange green by the device she peered into.

"Why not just follow the king?" I heard the stratigrapher Marano say. "He knows the place." He carried a long, thin cylinder that I took to be some kind of projectile weapon.

I consented to lead the way, playing out the ribbon through the stripes and flecks of moonlight that filtered among the generations of branches. With each stride my footsteps grew more confident. Yet the something I'd sensed was still pacing us on the other side of the hedge. Was it he?

"Some say that Creteia, first King and Father-of-All, still lurks at the heart," I said. "To hide the shame of his plot against his child, the Sun."

At the first branching I paused. My senses were still muffled, my thoughts unsure. Could it be I was unworthy and lacked the gifts of my forebears? Had my father's betrayal of tradition damned me as well? I peered uncertainly down into the dark throat. Did an unseen dead wall lurk there? I continued straight. From farther inside echoed a low growl, then an answer farther off. At the far turning I led them back along the crackling gravel of a doubleback.

"Won't this take us back where we came in?" Cromlech asked.

"Sometimes the opposite direction is the shortest way," I answered.

Cromlech hesitated. "Climewicz, go back to that last branch, just in case," he said. "If it dead-ends, turn around and catch up. And stay in radio contact."

I watched him disappear obediently back up the black tunnel. Even if I had been free to stop him, it would have been the worst impoliteness to intervene.

"Do you feel it?" Marano said as we drove on, deeper and deeper. "Like something watching."

"Don't you start falling into local mumbojumbo," Cromlech said.

"Yes," I said, "it is only your fancy."

"Say, look at this," Hazelton said, pointing at a purple kingsbane bulb above some shoots of perseis struggling to survive in the scant sun.

"We've never seen anything like that, I'm sure," Cromlech said, taking his eye from his image recorder to reach for it.

"It grows only here," I said. "Don't touch it!"

He snatched his fingers back just in time. "You said we could collect specimens."

I picked a pebble from the path and tossed it over the flower head. The bulb darted up in a sunburst of purple petals that slapped shut around the rock.

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"It prefers flesh," I said. "But it isn't particular. That is why so few who enter here return." I thought with sadness of my only other journey here.

There was a roar. It seemed closer, but one of the tricks of the Place of Turnings is that one can never be sure whether a sound comes from the next gallery over or from miles away.

"Climewicz!" Marano shouted into his communication device. "You there?" The only answer was an empty hiss like the surf that used to pound the beach.

"Must be a temporary dead spot," Cromlech said. "Climewicz is miles away — he's fine, he's doing his job. And we'd better do the same."

We moved on, another turning, and another.

"Do you hear a kind of buzzing?" Hazelton asked. "Sounds like those mock-bees on the last island." She ducked as the passage constricted into a low-ceilinged narthex.

"Did we get specimens of them?" Cromlech wanted to know.

We emerged into a kind of nave. There, unexpectedly, loomed the mossy cistern, just as I remembered it, a great basin hewn into living boulder thrusting between the leaves, a last vestige of Creteia's palace. Above it the smallbirds hovered and darted like bright jewels to deposit their distillate, their shadows flickering among the starry reflections of its still surface. Beyond lay the sunken and putrid carcasses of several of the smaller beasts.

"Of all the Place of Turning's creatures, the smallbirds alone could leave and return," I said, "for they fly straight through the gaps between the leaves. But they remain here because nowhere else can they find the kingsbane. A stone pipe drops off their store drop by drop into a new cistern outside the Place of Turnings.

"So you use the honey to ferment some kind of intoxicant?" Hazelton asked.

"Not precisely," I said.

"Wait a minute — is this what your torone comes from?"

"Look how much there is," Marano marveled. "And they told us it was so rare."

"You know how they are," Cromlech said softly, thinking I could not hear. "You can't trust a thing they say."

"It takes many measures to yield one of torone," I said. "Once a princeling chased a bright craterbird in here. He came upon this vat and climbed up on the rim to see what smelled so enticing, but he grew so entranced that he lost his footing and fell in. He was paralyzed instantly, of course. He drowned in the unspeakable sweetness."

At that moment the leaves shook with a roar of rage — and pain. It came from too huge a beast to be he, yet I was sure he was near. I halted.

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At the far bend of the next gallery, a small head poked suddenly into a shaft of moonlight to sniff at us.

"What a cute little thing," Marano said, halting.

The black mass of the rest of its body swayed into view behind it, exhaling the stench of rotted leaf and ancient flesh.

"Do we have one of those?" Cromlech gasped, raising his imager.

I could see the tattered outline of its transparent double wings. A marlot. It seemed to favor one side, as though it were injured, and it roared with pain.

"Whatever it is, it's not what we're after," Cromlech whispered, stepping back. Hazelton began to back toward us, too.

It stood silent and still as stone, head extended to study us. Then Cromlech's device burred softly as he recorded the marlot's image. At once its head jerked back. The recorder hummed on. With an agonized croak, the marlot flung its ponderous body toward us in a clatter of armor plates and crackle of branches. Hazelton was too late breaking into a run. The coarse hairs of the marlot's spiky forelegs caught her clothing, and she disappeared beneath the creature.

"She's got the directional equipment!" Cromlech screamed over his shoulder.

My powers were still no stronger or more collected, but I knew what the king my father would have done. I remembered the day he turned me to face him. "Forget these silly superstitions," his voice said as I kept my eyes shut to preserve Decorum. "It's not magic a true king needs, even if there were such a thing. Will you look at me, for mercy's sake? It is courage."

He was wrong about tradition, but he was a brave man, no mistake. So I stood firm and faced the oncoming creature.

Against my determination, it stopped as though it had been struck by a spear. It hesitated in confusion like a wave gone too far up the beach, its lower skirts of armor swaying. Then it groaned, sagged against the hedge, and sank down onto its side as though the air had been sucked out of it. We all heard Hazelton's weak cry as its weight settled on her.

"Quick!" Marano cried. "She'll be crushed!"

I squeezed forward as far as I could. Between the hedge and the body, I could just see the stiffened fingers of her hand reaching out, wet with blood and gritty with dirt. Just beyond, the lights of her device winked from where it had been pressed against the leaves. I drew it into my sleevebag without being noticed. "Too late," I said.

Marano wanted to pull the body free, but Cromlech ordered him to help look for her device. When they couldn't find it, they climbed up along the creature's side, streaked with mud and furred with patches of

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lichen, to measure and record.

"You see, it could not harm the king," I said.

"Bull," Marano answered, pointing. "Something tore its belly open."

I saw the yellow ichor he pointed to, oozing from three deep wounds along its underside. One was fresh.

His work, of course. There was no mistaking that.

"Our readings never indicated anything big enough to do this," Cromlech said.

"But it could be smart enough," Marano said. "If we've really got the first-ever independent evolutionary curve here and not the descendants of some lost expedition, then this possible missing link—"

A scream broke from the other side of the hedge.

"Climewicz?" Marano shouted. "Climewicz?" He began to hack at the hedge with the whirling blades of some mechanized cutting device, but the iron branches shook without breaking.

"No, it's this way!" Cromlech cried. "Over there! If we just hadn't lost Hazelton's equipment!"

The scream was cut off. The two remaining scientists exchanged mute looks.

Marano snapped off the whine of his cutting instrument and exchanged it for the weapon slung from his shoulder. "I'm loading triples."

"How are we going to make scientific history if you atomize it?" Cromlech said. "Digital imaging is all well and good, but we've got to have at least the hide,"

I led them up over the mass of flesh choking our way, then down to the next branching and into what appeared to be a cul-de-sac, but I pressed on doggedly to where the dead end proved itself a fool's wall hiding the next gallery. Had I sensed it? Had my powers finally begun to develop?

Waves of cold seemed to wash over me. Was he near? I felt the Gift hard against my forearm.

"He's gone into some kind of trance," Marano said.

My heart labored in my chest as I tried to drill into the darkness with my thoughts, but the blackness was a dead band across the emptiness of my eyes. I stumbled forward.

"Wait here," I managed, grabbing from branch to branch to steady myself down the length of the gallery.

I felt the light before I could see it beyond the corner. It seemed to coalesce out of the dark like the glow a jar of stars might cast if they could be plucked like smallbirds from the sky. All at once the passage opened into a nave filled with moonlight.

He was crouched behind a bush, red eyes glittering through the leaves. He rose as I came forward, head monstrously, unrecognizably swollen, scraps of brown leaf and tendril clinging to his shaggy mane.

"Did you bring any?" he rasped,

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trying to clear the catch in his throat as though the months of silence had made his phlegm as thick with twigs and bark as his mane. "Or did you just come back to finish the job?"

"Don't blame me," I said.

"Blame you?" The laugh echoed along the chutes of starlight between the leaves. "For wanting your own father dead?" He rose, back bent warily as an animal's. In one hand he held a crude spear, its tip dark and wet.

"I could never wish that," I said.

"Was it out of love you and Tetagi drugged me and left me here to die?" Each word stumbled on the heels of the last like soldiers too close together.

"It's the heir's duty when the king fails — in body or in mind. But my hand rebelled, and I hoped this place would do what I couldn't. I loved you."

"You lie!"

"But you were trying to change everything."

"I was taking advantage of what the off-worlders had to offer. The things they could teach us."

"You were imperiling Creation."

"Is that what the old ingrate told you?"

"Tetagi's heart ached at what he had to do."

He laughed again, then wiped a thread of drool from the corner of his mouth with his forearm. "He'll destroy you. He'll lead you to strike out at these people, and they have powers that make even your imaginary ones look puny. They can annihilate this whole planet."

"Never. The old ways have always been our salvation. Why else would I willingly make myself a prisoner?"

"That's the joke, isn't it? The crown you murdered for turns out to be a golden fetter." He began pacing restlessly, tugging at his matted fur with his nails. "No matter anymore—it's too late, it's too late. Did you bring any or not?"

"Any what?"

"As if you didn't know after all these — what is it, weeks, months, years on my throne? I've lost count." He shivered. "Torone, of course!"

"You're no longer king — you'd die."

"Don't be a fool. It's poison only if you haven't built up a tolerance. Why do you think old Tetagi laced our meals with it from birth? To make us the living statues Decorum needs on the throne. But eventually we can't live *without* it. Refuse your next dram and try to sleep, try even to sit for an hour. That will teach you agony. Refuse it for a month, and your body will twist and swell into what mine has become." He pawed the earth with his foot. "Just a measure a day. That's all I'd need. I'm no threat—my thoughts get more jumbled every day. You can fight the off-worlders all you want. I wouldn't even try to find the way out." He sank to his knees. "Please!"

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"You'd risk all Creation?"

"You still dealing in Tetagi's tripe? I suppose you think that Creteia still lives in here, too? That you can't look at anything or think about it too long without burning it up?" He shook his massive head. "Haven't you tried it, just once, and found it doesn't work? We're powerless as babies, both of us. It's what every king learned in time, and kept to himself till me. Creation doesn't so much as twitch whether we stub a toe or die by a son's hand. The torone just makes the discovery easier to bear."

"I stopped a marlot with my thoughts tonight!"

"No, boy — I struck it through the hedge with my spear to save your life!"

I stiffled a cry, eyes burning with tears as I tore the Gift from my sleeve. I saw him shield his red-rimmed eyes as it flashed down through the moonlight, but at the last moment it froze. I couldn't do it, not even to preserve Creation from the off-worlders. Not my own father.

There was a sharp crack. He jerked, stumbled back, then sank to his knees before me, his mane glittering with blood. From the corner of my eye, I saw Marano lower his weapon. A puff of smoke hung where the barrel had been.

"We were right!" Marano said. "It's humanoid!"

"Would it have been so hard to share?" The creature struggled to hold up his shaggy head and look at me.

"You don't understand — it's an heir's kindest gift when the king's reason and judgment fail," I said softly. "I want the same quick death when my earth-time comes."

"So you say now," he laughed. "Go ahead, but finish it the old way, or I'll come for you. I can't help myself — I'll search day and night. It's not the off-worlders or revenge— it's the drug. And if the path to the gate eludes me, I still know where the cistern is. I'll crack it open, let it all run out. Then see what it is to be a beast!"

This time when the Gift rose and fell, the bright blade did not hesitate. There was the faintest look of relief on his face as he rocked back on his heels, then swayed and toppled to the gravel in the hedgepath. In an instant I'd turned him over, digging with my knife and fingers.

"Your own father?" It was Marano.

"A king has no father," I said. "This was only another of the King's Beasts." I looked down at the wet lumps glistening in my palm like two sticky, round fruits.

"Don't let him damage it!" Cromlech shouted as he shuffled up to us. He seemed to be assembling some kind of weapon from his pack. "We've got to have it for—"

"Relax — it's an isolated mutation, maybe a local cancer, but it's got nothing to do with evolution

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here," Marano said. "Matter of fact, it turns out it's this guy's—"

Quickly I brought my hand to my lips.

"For Christ's sake, he's eating them!" Marano cried. "He's eating the goddamn eyes!"

"Shh!" Cromlech said. "Don't get him worked up or he might hurt the rest." Gently he squeezed the lever at one end of his weapon, and the nozzle at the other vomited a column of foam. "This hold-im bigfela beastie till we get to refrigerator in ship," he said soothingly. "Keep meat good in case kingfela want-im more later. Sure you eat-im *both* bigfela look-see?"

With a gurgle the nozzle spewed billows of undulating foam into the raddled starlight. It settled like wave spume over the king my father, filling the eye sockets. Marano turned away, speechless. I had no expression. My job was done.

"If you want-im alla meat," Cromlech said, "okay-dokay, then we just take-im bones when you done eating, stuff-im skin instead."

I stared down at the Gift, blade still wet. I licked it clean and slipped it away for the next of our line.

"You've just got to know how to handle them, that's all," Cromlech said to Marano.

"You don't understand," Marano said.

"No, you've got to let them have their little treats, and if you're patient, you get what you want."

I stepped back and took in a turn of ribbon. And another. When I was far enough into the shadows, I ran.

"Where'd he go?" Cromlech cried as I rounded the first bend. "Come back, you goddamn lying cannibal!"

By the second branching I was too far into the darkness for him to follow. I hurried on, pausing only at a glimpse of purple. I extended my hand to waken it with my scent. There was little chance Cromlech could have found his way even with Hazelton's device, but it was better not to risk it. I let go of the tracking device, heard it plop into the digestive pad as the petals closed with a feathery rustle.

I wound in more and more ribbon as the echoes of desperate cries skipped from pathway to pathway behind me until they blended among the far-off roars and growls. I felt sorry for them all, even Cromlech, but Decorum demands death for knowing the ending of the king, and my world hung in the balance. I could not let my father's weakness show in me.

The sun was rising when I reached the outermost ring, barely in time to return to my throne. I waded through the slanted bars of light driven into the leafy shadows, and looked out at my waiting bearers and hoodsmen. A part of me longed to stay where I was, monarch of that diminished realm, freer than any of my line had ever been.

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But that is not the duty of the king. The struggle my father almost lost had passed to me. I understood now why my ancestors insisted the new king face the old, for in that meeting is the seal of strength, when the new king looks into the eyes of whence he came and where he will go. I understood what the late king my father had not. The old ways are best.

I see from your backs you've grown ever so much more comfortable. No, no, don't try to rise. You can't, I'm afraid. Now you can appreciate how easy it is for me to stare into the middle distance without moving or focusing on anything. Nothing to it when the wine is sweet with torone.

But I must go. While I sleep, your remains, like my hair and nail parings, will be spirited away by Tetagi.

Do you, too, imagine I endanger my world with your deaths? On the contrary, my journey into the Place of Turnings has confirmed my faith. I think your fathers-of-fathers will not send those ships you threatened. If they are, as you say, such great rulers, then they, too, must understand Decorum and why I must do as I do to serve my children's needs. Surely, like the poor man at the rich man's gate, they would sooner turn on their heels and go home than seem insensitive to the proprieties that maintain the tranquility of this poor and humble corner of Creation.

And if they would not? I have but to look in their direction.

"Listen, Blumenkraft — It wasn't all that funny the first *time you said 'Good morning, ladies and germs.'"*

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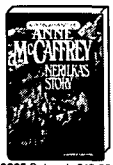

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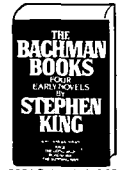

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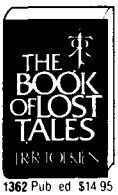

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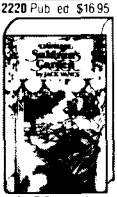

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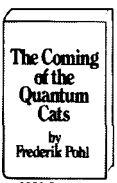

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